It’s Not Just Play: Finding the Harmony With Academics
by Carolyn S. Candela, Behavior Specialist (Preschool Focus)

How many times have you heard a colleague or friend use the phrase “work hard, play hard?” This phrase suggests that one feels that they have earned, or are entitled to: fun, free time, rest and relaxation, downtime, etc…, from all the activities of the day requiring thought, effort, concentration, learning, synthesizing and being productive members of society. Adults seem to view “play” as a reward for hard work.

Why then, do we seem to be at a crossroads when it comes to preschoolers as to how much of their day, if any at all, they spend playing in school? Historically, play always seemed to be a natural part of preschool, strategically utilized as if it were a milestone, right of passage, or incentive for desired behavior. However, for preschoolers, play shouldn’t just be a reward for completing work or following directions, but a conduit for learning academic, social, and life skills. Preschool programs should incorporate learning into play activities and vice versa, rather than treating the two as opposing entities. In other words, there should not be a division or competition between learning and play. With the increasing academic demands since the inception of NCLB and the Common Core Learning Standards, educators shouldn’t feel that there is only time for “drill and kill” style academics, but rather, they are encouraged to conceptualize play as a pathway to learning. To illustrate, consider that in 2011, the NYS Board of Regents adopted and approved the NYS Prekindergarten Foundations for the Common Core which align with the K-12 standards; and, in all 5 domains, there is evidence of advocacy for play as a pedagogy for learning (i.e. Domain 1: Approaches to learning, part 1-Engagement: “[student] Actively and confidently engages in play as a means of exploration and learning.”


“A strong core curriculum and playful pedagogy are NOT incompatible”
~Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff (Researchers/Authors)

Benefits of Play

Why should all preschoolers have access to play and what functions or utilities does play serve? The National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009) named play as a vital component in developmentally appropriate educational practice, and the United Nations High Commission on Human Rights (1989) recognized play as a fundamental right of every child. These groups advocate to protect play at a time when children are playing (unstructured and outdoor) 8 hours less a week than they were over two decades ago (Elkind, in White (2012). Due to a separation between play and learning driven by increased academic standards.

When one thinks of play in an educational setting, we often think of recess and/or outdoor play, playground and physical activities whether structured or not, and also make-believe play. However, both indoor and outdoor play have benefits and skills to be gained and should be incorporated into the educational curriculum (see figure 1 on page 4). The two types of play most discussed in the research literature are Free play and Guided play. Free play is sometimes called unstructured play and is voluntary, child-led/driven and spontaneous, as the child gets to choose what and how they will play, allowing for creativity and imagination. Free play can occur through fantasy or make believe play, physical play, or with objects (toys). In contrast, Guided play, also called Structured play, occurs when adults facilitate children’s learning and can fall on a continuum based on how much adults set up the environment, interact with, and support the child (White, 2012). In structured play, there is a learning goal and scaffolding occurs, but it is still child driven. The ideal learning environment would incorporate a balance of both child initiated play with an engaged teacher and focused hands-on learning that is teacher driven. http://nysaeyc.org/. Within these two types of play, there are 4 categories or domains of benefit that a preschooler gains: social, physical (occurring in recess and physical ed.), emotional, and cognitive (see figure 2 on page 2).

Strategies

As figure 2 summarizes the many benefits of play in the 4 domains, let’s take a closer look at the cognitive and emotional categories and the importance of how play can enhance the development of executive functioning and in particular, the skill of self-regulation. Researchers and scientists have stated that the skill that best predicted academic achievement, income, criminality, dropout rate, and drug use at age 32 was executive functioning. (i.e. standing quietly in line, raising a hand before speaking). Good executive functioning is a better predictor of success in school than a child’s IQ (Spiegel (2008) in Lockhart). Executive functioning, which occurs in the prefrontal cortex of the brain and develops in the first 5 years of life, involves the ability to control ones behavior and responses, or self-regulation, as well as controls impulses and attention, planning, judgment, problem solving and metacognition. Highly developed self-regulation is evident in positive social relations, flexibility and task persistence. In addition, effective executive functioning enables students to focus, follow

(cont. on pg. 2)
rules, and think before answering by planning, initiating and completing an activity with the appropriate emotional and behavioral responses. Play serves as the perfect medium through which to develop and practice executive functioning and self-regulation skills. In addition, kindergarten teachers often rank self-regulation (the ability to control impulses) as the most important skill needed, but often lacking for school readiness (www.toolsofthemind.org/philosophy/self-regulation/).

Some strategies (see figure 3 on page 4) can be used by educators and incorporated into play to promote development of executive functioning and self-regulation skills. Also, some children need to be taught how to play due to limited opportunities outside of school and lack of exposure socializing with peers, just as one would teach literacy and math in an explicit and systematic way. Then, once play skills develop, teachers can withdraw their support or scaffold (Leong & Bodrova, 2012). Interestingly, children often assist in regulating each other’s behavior when playing by pointing out, for example, it is not their turn and they have to wait, or telling them they are not the “mom” or “Dr.” this time. Some play activities that build executive functioning include: Imaginary/pretend play, storytelling by children, movement with songs and games (i.e. red light, green light=Impulse control), and types of matching and sorting games. Partners in Action provide a self regulation action planning tool for practitioners to reflect on ways in which they currently do, or strategies they could use to promote self-regulation (Click on this link to access the "Partners in Action Resource Set: Increasing Self-Regulation Skills.”

With so many benefits to play, it follows that when children are deprived of play and/or recess, there are detrimental effects. Olga Jarrett (2013) reported the average time for recess has declined by an average of 50 minutes per week for 20% of US schools since NCLB. A study published in 2011 (in Jarrett, 2013), reported that only 40% of schools had a mandatory recess policy. Peter Gray, author of “Free to Learn” discusses the correlation between loss of play time, both in and out of school and the rise in mental health issues in children. By taking away play time, social emotional skills aren’t developing and increases in anxiety, depression and trouble with peer relationships occurs. A death of play in school can also impair coping with stress, managing risk, concentration, social skills and applying what one learned (National Playing Fields Association, March 2000).

National organizations such as the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists, have recommended policies regarding physical activity, recess and importantly, NOT taking recess away as punishment! In an article published in The Atlantic (S. Cordell, 2013), it was reported that 77% of principals stated taking away recess is a part of their discipline plan. Students who have an abundance of energy (especially those with ADHD, exhibiting impulsive behaviors and lacking self-regulation and self-control) and are not engaged in learning, may appear to be engaging in misbehaviors. In Crisis in the Kindergarten, the authors state that experts believe “developmentally inappropriate expectations and practices are causing normal child behavior to be wrongly labeled as misbehavior and normal learning patterns to be mislabeled as learning disabilities” (Miller and Almon, 2009). Therefore, restricting the very thing children need, access to play, won’t solve the problem. The increase in aggressive behaviors in preschools, resulting in 3 and 4 year olds being expelled at a rate 3x higher than the national average for K-12 students (yes you read right), suggests a correlation between the decrease of dramatic play and expulsion; specifically, less play may lead to more expulsions (Gilliam in Almon and Miller, 2009).

As Behavior Specialists for the RSE-TASC who assist districts in reducing suspensions, improving school climate and reducing ineffective and negative disciplinary practices through proactive positive approaches, we advocate for research based best practices regarding positive discipline and a multi-tiered system of support. Using recess or restricting access to play as a punishment is most often counterproductive. Some schools have implemented policies to restrict teachers removing access to recess and play as punishment. Play and recess allow for movement and assist in resetting one’s ability to focus and to better pay attention; a break for our brains (that we as adults often need). Instead of removing a child from play time or recess, use the situation as a teachable moment to model self-regulation and provide a positive alternative to the misbehavior. Adults must also ask themselves before removing access, if it would be a logical consequence of the behavior. Furthermore, adults must try to determine the function of the behavior; meaning, what was the child trying to communicate: boredom, hunger, fear, anger, etc… before doling out consequences. These strategies are part of the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports that the RSE-TASC assists schools in implementing at the Preschool and school age levels. When there are so many proven benefits to play and recess, it seems illogical to remove it as a form of discipline; so do consider, what does removal really teach the child?

In conclusion, educators shouldn’t have to choose between teaching through direct instruction of academic skills and learning through play but can find a balance between both by learning through play and playing to learn. Play is one of the best tools teachers have in their toolboxes to teach academics and life skills. So, the next time you ask a 3 to 5 year old what they’re doing or what they did at school today and their reply is “just played”, know and have confidence that they did so much more (in essence they worked hard) and gained valuable skills and knowledge for their futures.
Long Island RSE-TASC Regional Workshops

To Register for our Regional Workshops, you may visit our new and improved website by clicking on this link: [http://www.esboces.org/Page/89](http://www.esboces.org/Page/89), or...

Please go to [http://webreg.esboces.org](http://webreg.esboces.org) to register online.

Under “Search Options”, pull-down and check RSE-TASC and then click “Search”.

Then, simply scroll down to register for the workshop you are interested in. Clicking on the hyperlinked workshop dates below will bring you directly to the respective MyLearningPlan® registration page.

### Long Island RSE-TASC Regional Catalogue Sample

**For a Complete Listing of Workshops, visit our Regional Catalogue**

**October**
- Developing Measureable Goals in the time of Common Core Standards  
  *facilitated by Ms. Arlene Crandall*
  *(Garden City MS)—10/14/15*
- Interagency Transition Teams  
  *facilitated by Mrs. Cathy Pantelides, Ms. Doris Stanojev & Mr. Michael Mastrocinque*
  *(Nassau)—10/15/15*
- Literacy Instruction and Strategies for Students in Non-District Settings  
  *facilitated by Mr. Larry Anderson*
  *(DDI, Woodbury)—10/15/15*
- Non-district Professional Learning Community  
  *facilitated by Mr. Larry Anderson*
  *(Hagedorn—Hisksville)—10/16/15*
- Preschool PBIS and the Pyramid Model: Tier 1 Universal Supports  
  *facilitated by Ms. Carolyn Candela*
  *(Western Suffolk)—10/19/15*
- Evidenced Based Practices in Classroom Management (*3-day workshop*)  
  *facilitated by Mr. Gary Coppolino*
  *(Nassau)—10/29/15—Day 1*

**November & December**
- Student-Directed IEP Workshop Series (*4-day series*)  
  *facilitated by Mrs. Cathy Pantelides, Ms. Doris Stanojev & Mr. Michael Mastrocinque*
  *(Eastern Suffolk)—11/2/15—Day 1*
- Overview of the State Education Department IEP Development Guide  
  *facilitated by Ms. Arlene Crandall & Ms. Andrea Lachar*
  *(Western Suffolk)—11/5/15*
- What is the Language Proficiency Team  
  *facilitated by Ms. Elizabeth DeFazio-Rodriguez*
  *(Western Suffolk)—11/19/15*
- Developing Measurable Annual Goals in the Era of the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS)  
  *facilitated by Ms. Andrea Lachar*
  *(Eastern Suffolk)—11/30/15*
- Specially Designed Instruction (SDI) for Beginners  
  *facilitated by Ms. Andrea Lachar*
  *(Eastern Suffolk)—12/11/15*
Strategies to build self-regulation skills and Examples in Practice

- **Plan Play Activities** *(Focusing and Impulse control)*: Ask a child what he/she wants to play; ask to describe what they’ll do; have child draw a picture or describe how they will play their self-chosen activity

- **Setting up the environment** *(learning to suppress impulses and delay gratification through staying in a game for a duration, abiding by rules and taking turns)*: Stimulate play through access to materials and props; allow time for reflection and post-play discussion; provide visual supports (picture schedules and pictures of problem solving steps); take an engaged role by asking questions that may lead to or guide toward specific learning goals

- **Giving extended play time & Plan for Incorporation** *(task completion)*: Allow children to finish what they started; carryover play activities into lessons in math, literacy, science, and ELA

- **Modeling** *(demonstrate how to accomplish a play activity or task while modeling appropriate behavior to achieve the goal)*: For example, modeling how to take turns in conversation with a playmate

- **Cues & Hints** *(how to pay attention to peers and work their emotions)*: Problem solve by both modeling and giving hints on how to share and choose an activity when playing with peers; direct cues by stating to a child where to look at their peer during play and pointing to direct their attention when a playmate is trying to get their attention

---

**References—CLICK ON HYPERLINKS**


---

**RSE-TASC STAFF**

**IN SUFFOLK CALL • 631.218.4197**

**CENTRAL OFFICE (Suffolk office):**
**Vincent Leone, Long Island RSE-TASC Coordinator & Editor in Chief**
**Lynn Hayes, Senior Clerk Typist**
**Laurie Morin, Senior Account Clerk Typist**
**Victoria Jones, Clerk Typist**
**Connie Guzman, Logistics and Operations Specialist**

**NASSAU SPECIAL EDUCATION SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT SPECIALISTS (SESI):**
**Naomi Gershman**
**Stefanie DelGiamo**
**Joane Vincent**
**Roxane Diamond, Senior Typist Clerk**

**SUFFOLK SPECIAL EDUCATION SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT SPECIALISTS (SESI):**
**Marjorie Guzewsic**
**MariLuz Genao**
**Lisa Boerum**

**REGIONAL TRAINERS (Suffolk office):**
**Laurence Anderson, Non-District Specialist**
**Arlene B. Crandall, Regional Special Education Training Specialist (RSETS)**
**Andrea Lachar, Regional Special Education Training Specialist (RSETS)**
**Elizabeth DeFazio-Rodriguez, Bilingual Special Education Specialist**
**Michelle Levy, Suffolk Behavior Specialist**
**Gary Coppolo, Jr., Nassau Behavior Specialist**
**Carolyn Candela, Behavior Specialist, Preschool focus**
**Cathy Pantelides, Transition Specialist**
**Doris Stanojev, Transition Specialist**
**Michael Mastrocinque, Transition Specialist**