

# The Importance of Play

- Kereth Harris

A recent school pick of my favourite little human, my five-year-old nephew, most certainly provided me with food for thought about the demands that are being placed on children of such a young age.

I am very lucky to spend a lot of time with Aidan. This normally involves a dose of my crazy aunt antics, as well as some decent time where he gets to play with all the much loved, and time honoured toys my now seventeen-year-old son has grown out of.

Watching Aidan grow up has been a real privilege. With a background in early childhood education, it has been a delight to watch him reach all his developmental milestones, in all areas. Like many other five-year-olds, he is active, curious, creative, imaginative, enjoys playing with other people and really doesn't stop talking!

Our conversation on this particular day revolved around the normal 'what did you do today?', kind of questions. Aidan was, with a bit of prompting, forthcoming about the long list of activities he had done during his day at school. I ventured to ask him about what he had played, and he matter of fact informed me that he had played outside.

Curious about his response I questioned him some more about his playing. I wanted to know what he played and why he liked to play, and why he had only 'played outside'. His response was simple. He liked play because he 'did not have to sit still and be bored.' Not wanting to fill his head with answers I asked him what he meant. He told me that he only *played* outside. Inside he had to sit and do stuff. 'Aunty Kay, you know when you play, you can move and that is good for you.' This marvellous little five-year-old, in a sentence, showed he understood why play was so important for him and for his friends.

At some point after their fourth birthday little people can start in a kindergarten class, and while compulsory school only starts in pre primary, it is strongly recommended that we send our children to kindergarten, or 'kindy' as it is fondly referred to. The word kindergarten is from the German language. Kinder meaning child, and garten meaning garden. This word reflects Fredrich Froebel's vision for early childhood in the nineteenth century, and still holds true today. Self-directed play was central in those early kindergartens and underpinning it were four basic ideas: free self-expression, creativity, social participation and motor expression (learning by doing). This work was recognised by our own Cyril Jackson, Head of the West Australian Education Department in the 1930s, when he recruited experts in Froebel's philosophy to train early childhood educators in the importance of play and how to implement it into kindergarten provision.



So, what has really changed for our children? Quite a lot really! Curriculum expectations, national testing, parental expectations, and the introduction of technology are the tip of the iceberg. We will all have a different take on what has changed, and why, but essentially opportunities for our children to play have decreased, and we as parents, teachers and individuals who care deeply about matters for children, must advocate strongly for more opportunity.

Research is telling us that play is important and here is a snippet of what it is saying.

Play allows children to be free dreamers and create narratives about themselves and their world. It allows them to make sense of the complex and complicated, that is daily life. Play is the first activity that is organised by the child for themselves. They initiate it, resource it and work to understood boundaries.

Play is a process. It doesn't require worksheets or the ability to blend CVC words. When we observe children play, we can delight in seeing them rehearse their possible futures and explore the universal meaning of human activity and life.

There is a lot of chatter in education circles around the 21st century skills that we need to be teaching in our schools. Activities to learn to collaborate, communicate, be flexible, resilient, creative, and problem solve are being thought up on a daily basis and implemented into primary and secondary classrooms. These are the skills of play. Children learn and develop these skills through high quality opportunities for extended play.

So, what can we do?

Support initiatives by early childhood educators that promote play in their settings and communities.

Provide opportunities for your children to play, both indoors and out. Prioritise play over homework. Play with your child and see it as a privilege. Talk to them about their play and what they are doing. Be prepared to listen authentically or respect their choice to keep their game to themselves.

Remember that children are only young for a very short period of time. They have a lifetime to learn to read and write and do numbers. The window of opportunity to play freely and creatively, without judgement, expectations, and outcomes, is relatively small. By valuing the importance of play, and the real learning that occurs during play, you are cherishing and respecting your child.

**Kereth Harris is a teacher and writer in Western Australia. She is a passionate supporter of the Valuing Children Initiative.**

## References

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To achieve this we challenge Australians, from parents to politicians, to reflect on their attitudes towards children and young people; to advocate with, and for, kids to ensure they are valued within society and their voices are heard.

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