Beginnings Workshop

The Value of Play

Play, Policy, and Practice: The Essential Connections
by Edgar Klugman and Sandra Waite-Stupiansky
What’s New in Play Research? by Doris Pronin Fromberg
Observations of Play by Margaret Cooney
Documenting Play by Lynn Cohen

Child Care Information Exchange • PO Box 3249, Redmond, WA 98073-3249 • (800) 221-2864
Three children are deeply engaged in a blockbuilding project, two researchers are discussing teacher entry into child play, an educator is preparing an article on the value of play as it occurs in an early childhood program. Are all these people — their thoughts, ideas and work — connected? We strongly argue “Yes” — in fact, the connections made among and between these people are crucial to quality care and education of young children.

Have parents ever confronted you, the director, about providing more academic programming? Have you interacted with teachers who want to integrate play into the curriculum but aren’t sure how? Have teachers in your program read about research on the importance of play for later learning? Interactions such as these point to the necessity for finding, making, and supporting connections among play, policy, and practice.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children, in its publication, Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs (Bredekamp and Copple, 1997) takes the stand that play belongs at the center of a curriculum designed for the young child. As a matter of fact, ongoing research, as well as publication after publication in the early childhood field, emphasizes the crucial, intrinsic connections among play, policy, and practice.

Over the last century, research and theory in early childhood education have continued to point to the connections between play and learning. Theories and research findings of Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky first informed educators of the active role children take in their learning. More recently, the curriculum model of the Reggio Emilia schools in Italy demonstrates that children act as the inventors and constructors of their own knowledge through their active and interactive explorations of the world. In the words of Loris Malaguzzi (1993), the teacher-theorist whose ideas shaped the schools in Reggio Emilia, “Always and everywhere children take an active role in the construc-

Sandra Waite-Stupiansky, Ph.D. teaches preschoolers and kindergartners at the Miller Research Learning Center on the campus of Edinboro University of Pennsylvania. Her book, Building Understanding Together: A Constructivist Approach to Early Childhood Education, was published earlier this year by Delmar Publishers (Albany, NY). She serves as the Managing Editor for the Play, Policy, and Practice Connections newsletter.

Edgar Klugman, Ed.D. is a specialist in child and family policy. He is one of the founders of the Play, Policy and Practice Caucus and consulting editor of Play, Policy and Practice Connections newsletter. He has co-authored and edited Children, Families & Government, Cambridge University Press; Children’s Play and Learning: Perspectives and Policy Implications, Teachers College Press; and Play, Policy and Practice, Redleaf Press.
tion and acquisition of learning and understanding” (p. 60). If educators, parents, administrators, and others responsible for young children accept children as active learners, then play becomes a vehicle, we would argue the most important vehicle, to empower children as learners.

In a work-oriented culture, such as ours, play is often perceived as the inverse of productive work. Play is reserved for after school or after work. It is often seen as the frivolous activity that children and adults earn through their hard work.

Yet, the widely-accepted definition of play in early childhood literature focuses on the intrinsically-motivated, child-directed, open-ended nature of play. Play is exploratory and process-oriented more than product-driven (Waite-Stupiansky, 1997). Play and learning are inextricably intertwined for young children. In fact, a recent study by Cooney (1997) found that preschool-age children blur the lines between play and work. It is not until formal schooling that children begin to differentiate between the two activities. Thus, play and work are not dichotomous, but are part of the whole-thinking-learning process for young children.

As directors/policy makers, we are presented with a special leadership role in facilitating and helping to encourage the dialogue around play, policy, and practice and in affecting the perceptions and decisions which relate to it. Only to the extent that we can do this can we affect the quality of experiences offered to the children in our programs. We need to find ways to welcome and integrate the voices of children, classroom teachers, parents, researchers, teacher educators, administrators, and policy makers, each of whom represents an important perspective on the issues surrounding children’s play.

Sylvia Washington, a new director of a small child care center, finds that the teaching staff are most comfortable using play materials which are highly structured, such as coloring books, puzzles, and other quiet materials, leaving little opportunity for children to use their own ideas, imaginations, or creativity. They leave the children completely on their own and spend the outdoor time talking to each other. The educational background of the teaching staff includes a high school diploma for all, and some additional college courses in the liberal arts and general education for two. One staff member received a bachelor’s degree in English. The Center director has a master’s degree in leadership and early childhood education.

Since the director feels strongly that play is one of the most important components of the program, and since she is new to the setting, she uses her entry process to dialogue with individuals who are directly or indirectly involved with the program. She sets up meetings with teachers, board members, and parents. She invites their thoughts about the school, the overall program, and children’s play in particular. She develops a few questions to ask all constituents so that feedback about the findings can be provided to members of each of the groups being interviewed. Interestingly, she finds that the teachers all rate play as theoretically the most important activity in the center. The parents are most concerned that the children “learn something.” Board members see learning and play as important dimensions of the program, but add safety as their additional concern.

As a next step, the director invites each group to meet with her to share feedback on the findings and to begin to point out ways to address the concerns and issues raised by each constituency. The meetings focus simultaneously on ways to address the safety of children, their play, and their learnings. The teaching staff decides to focus the year’s staff development effort on play and learning. The board requests that a joint sub-committee be set up to consider the three issues of play, learning, and safety, with representation from all three constituencies. The director sees that it would be helpful if a parent and a board member were to become a link between the sub-committee and the staff development sessions. While this seems somewhat difficult in terms of time arrangements, two people from each category volunteer to alternately attend the teaching staff development seminars.

Since the concern of all constituent groups is children’s learning, the first few sessions of the staff development seminar focus on play and learning. The director suggests that each person think about her own childhood play memories. To help people get started, the director suggests that it might be useful to think about any of the following: a) the age of the player at the time of the play memory; b) the place in which the play memory occurred (e.g., was it indoors or outdoors? school or home?); c) whether the memories were of playing alone or with others; if with others, who they were; d) the toys, play equipment, or natural materials such as wood, sand, or water, involved in the play memory.

Now the group of teachers and representatives from the board and parents analyze their childhood play memories from a learning perspective. As they go through the process, the extent of interdependence and intertwining of
play and learning becomes clearer. The teachers, board members, and the parents are astonished at this interconnection. The next sessions are planned to focus on classroom observation, assessment of play, and a new look at the role of the adult as teacher, facilitator, and life-span-expander for children.

Needless to say, those involved in this integrated process are able to gain a new level of understanding and respect for children’s play. At a later point in the year, when it is time to plan the following year’s budget, board members who have experienced the integrated staff development sessions will have far better grounding in what it can mean for program and children when integrated, carefully designed staff development seminars, such as those offered by Sylvia, are made available. The board easily passes the necessary separate budget items to support the ongoing seminars and begins to accrue for the center carefully selected, play-enhancing materials and equipment for the next academic year. This center is well on its way toward the goals of staff development, board development, and program development and improvement. A fall-out product is the team building among the diverse constituent groups which undoubtedly will continue to be very useful during the following year as new challenges are encountered and met.

To return to the initial question: Are there essential connections among play, policy, and practice? This example illustrates that there are powerful and positive connections in programs that value play as the vehicle for learning. The constituents involved in the preceding example would give a resounding affirmative response. They can refer to the work they have done and its many positive results, to explain why the connections are crucial. In the process, they revisited the play experiences they had as children and discovered the reasons why play and learning cannot be separate for young children.

References


Cooney, M. *Play from a child’s perspective. Play, Policy, and Practice Connections*, the Newsletter of the Play, Policy, and Practice Caucus of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1997. (Available by writing Sandra Waite-Stupiansky, Miller Research Learning Center, Edinboro University of PA, Edinboro, PA 16444).


verybody is an expert in identifying when young children are at play, because we can see it happening, and we expect that children will play. We are less ready to consider that some of the same processes go underground throughout adult life. By looking at what play is, what children do while they engage in play, and what benefits they derive from play, we have a chance to learn how they think and what they know. Sociodramatic play is a powerful developmental activity and form of assessment.

Defining and Describing Play Processes

Play is symbolic (acting “as if” or “what if”), meaningful, active, pleasurable even when serious, voluntary and intrinsically motivated, rule-governed (implicitly or explicitly), and episodic (shifting spontaneously and flexibly). The philosopher John Dewey (1933) suggests a continuum of fooling… play… work… drudgery, and indicates that a balance between play and work is the reasonable place for education to take place. Psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) sees play as a rule-bound form of impulse control that leads children’s underlying representational development. He sees play as a “scaffolding” that takes place as children engage in social activity at the edge of their learning potential (“zone of proximal development”). When children play, they are able to leave the play framework, communicate with one another about how to play (e.g., “You be the doctor and I’ll be the sick baby), and reenter the play (e.g., “Waah!”) after having negotiated the rules of engagement.

Doris Pronin Fromberg is Professor of Education and Director, Early Childhood Teacher Education at Hofstra University where she also served as Chairperson, Department of Curriculum and Teaching. She teaches graduate courses in early childhood curriculum and early literacy. She is past president of the National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators and is an advocate for high-quality early childhood teacher and administrator education. Her publications include: The Full-Day Kindergarten: Planning and Practicing a Dynamic Themes Curriculum (second edition), Teachers College Press, The Encyclopedia of Early Childhood Education co-edited with Leslie Williams (Garland) and Play from Birth to Twelve and Beyond co-edited with Doris Bergen (in press, 1998, Garland).
Script building together is the powerful, central process in sociodramatic play. Children use their personal and cultural knowledge of events (e.g., shopping, cooking, weddings, street scenes, television settings) to build scripts together. Using the outline of their daily life experiences, children create new scripts “through shared predictability and collaborative novelty”. They learn a great deal about what other people understand by their reactions to suggestions, come to understand other children’s perspectives, and refine their ways to influence others’ rules in the script. In these ways, script building is similar to the relationships of an editor and author or coach and player.

Theory of mind researchers try to understand how children represent the real as well as the imaginary, think about their own thinking, and the thinking of others. They have asked children about desires, beliefs, false beliefs, and deception as well as looked at children’s play. The active verbal and physical nature of sociodramatic play offers opportunities for such study. There is a sense from both script theory and theory of mind study that human beings, through social interaction, develop the use of multiple “mental models” and “image schemas” to represent their experiences. In these ways, play functions with a “grammar” of experience in which its surface forms represent underlying integrated processes.

Play and Development

There is agreement among researchers that engaging in sociodramatic play helps children to develop their literacy skills, social competence, and their cognitive ability, especially problem solving. There is also a group of studies, that have been challenged, which have found that children’s pretend play improves their imagination and creativity.

Literacy skills develop through opportunities for social interaction. A body of applied research points to the importance of simultaneously varying props, writing materials, and play themes in order to enrich children’s literacy, for example, when children play with beauty parlor, post office, bank, and hospital props that include language literacy materials and emergent numeracy materials. Other studies have found that children’s story recall improves when they have engaged in role playing after hearing a story, particularly when small groups had opportunities to play out the stories.

Social competence appears to be more apparent in pretend play than other activities and children maintain stability and consistency by sharing meanings. Children’s play with older children, siblings, and parents is more advanced and extended than with peers. “Master players” are more flexible, fluid, cooperative, and engaged in extended play. More secure children show similar characteristics. These characteristics make it easier for other children to accept them and their ideas. On the other hand, children who have had many different group settings are less competent in their play.

Cognitive development takes place during pretend play. When teachers or parents have intervened by playfully modeling, providing varied props, and raising play-related questions, young children have become more flexible planners, used more expanded language, and sustained play for longer periods of time. Researchers have found a relationship between enriched adult play intervention and children’s academic skills, as well as I.Q., with an improvement in systematic and process-oriented problem solving. There is also evidence that the use of low-specificity toys is related to more interactive play and a longer shared play script.

Imagination helps when children need to wait because they create imaginary stories, and use analogies. After exposure to modeling and the use of divergent materials, young children have been able to engage in more combinatorial play and make new connections. Children seem to stimulate each other’s imaginations when in groups of two or three, and working with the group itself might help to reduce aggressive behavior.

Integration of cognitive, linguistic, socioemotional, and creative processes characterizes pretend play. Problem solving, which children practice during their play, requires such integration. It is helpful to consider the integrative function of play as having lymphatic function within children’s experience and learning. It is worthwhile, therefore, for teachers to provide opportunities for children to have the choice of a rich sociodramatic play life in group settings.

Implications for Teachers and Administrators

Planning for sociodramatic play means providing time, space, resources, and support. Children need long blocks of time (a minimum of 45–60 minutes) in order to organize and play out their scripts. They need space with changing themes and props (4–6 weeks for a theme and related props). Maintaining the housekeeping center for the entire year as a housekeeping center reduces opportunities for expanded language and ideas.

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to develop. Extending opportunities for richly varied and novel experiences also adds to children’s event knowledge, which forms the basis for their scripting of plays.

When teachers sit in the blocks area, a source of visual-spatial learnings that assist the development of children’s mathematical competence, more girls, who tend to remain near the teacher, are likely to participate. Literacy materials can be in the blocks area as well as other thematic sociodramatic play areas, including the housekeeping area. These provisions should be available among the choices in general activity periods during which small groups of children work together.

Consider also the power of interage grouping for scaffolding children’s play and learning. Teachers circulate and intervene unobtrusively.

It is relevant for teachers of young children to review their schedules in order to provide for mostly small groups to work together much of the time for longer time blocks. These provisions mean reviewing the daily schedule to eliminate many shorter time blocks and their related transition times, which denote more whole group instruction.

**Questioning** with a view toward expanding children’s language use differs from questioning that demands a single correct answer. If there is only one answer and the teacher already knows it, then it is a testing or guessing exercise and not an authentic question. Children are able to expand their language use when teachers use open-ended questions to which children may respond with their ideas, opinions, preferences, or descriptions. Children can interpret and predict what might happen in a story and then role play different endings. When a teacher models divergent questioning and role playing, children learn to use a wider range of options in their pretend play and language use. Most important, children feel a sense of competence and power to choose. Such a sense of success goes a long way toward preventing the development of destructive behavior.

**Ethical Teaching.** Young children are often willing to please adults and can do many things that are not necessarily most helpful to their long-term development as responsible, independent, flexible, and socially competent thinkers. Parents sometimes have other ideas about what their children’s school experience should look like. It helps, therefore, to document what children are learning, through photographs and slides, children’s drawings and writings, language experience charts, one- or two-line notes home to each family on a rotating basis with information about what their child accomplished that day, and a newsletter describing the themes, books, and experiences to which children were exposed.

Adults who work with young children have an ethical responsibility to provide worthwhile experiences that can help young children feel successful as they construct many ways to work, play, and think. While sociodramatic play may be a vehicle for extending children’s learning, it is worthwhile in its own right as a potentially empowering, integrative, joyful, aesthetic, and humanizing experience. The teacher whose focus and trust rest with children’s construction of important integrated connections serves the ethical purpose of education. A sense of appreciation, respect, humor, and playfulness helps, too.

**References**


Diane, an early childhood education teacher, wonders why some children in her inclusive prekindergarten classroom can enter ongoing play and why others have such difficulty. She thinks the children who receive special education services have more problems with this than the other children. Diane hypothesizes to her director that if she could help all the children with their play entry skills, the social skills level of the entire group would improve. Diane further speculates that more advanced social skills would positively impact the children’s cognitive, language, affective, and physical development. (Ogletti, 1997)

In order for Diane to help the children in her classroom with their play entry skills, she will first have to spend some time observing their play. She needs to know where they are developmentally, what play entry strategies they are using, and which ones result in successful bids. Then she can reinforce the successful strategies and teach them directly or indirectly to the children in her classroom.

This entire process depends upon Diane’s ability to collect useful observation records of the children at play. She will need guidance and support from her director to master observation and recording skills.

**Observing and Recording Play Benefits Children**

Communicating the value of observing and recording children’s play in order to benefit the children themselves is an important contribution her director can make to Diane’s plan. According to our profession, observation is the early childhood teacher’s most effective means of assessment (NAEYC, 1988; NAEYC/
Observation and recording strategy, it is necessary to take the following steps:

1. **Choose a naturalistic, familiar, and informal setting.** This setting allows children to be observed in a context that resembles their everyday environment, providing a more authentic picture of their behavior. It is important to ensure that the setting is not overly structured or contrived, as this can influence the children's natural behavior.

2. **Identifying children with special needs.** Observation and recording techniques used routinely by the teacher can provide important and specific data to support the teacher’s impression of a child’s needs. Through observation of children at play, the experienced observer gains insights into all areas of child development. For example, Diane’s videotaped observations allowed her to watch specific children at play to determine their skill at entering play groups. During this process, Diane noticed that two of the children consistently utilized two play entry strategies that were unsuccessful. They disrupted the ongoing play and seemed unaware of peer emotions. These observations provided important information to Diane about how to help the two children learn successful play entry strategies.

Because children’s play tends to reveal their highest levels of development, observing them during play gives their teacher a more accurate view of their competence (Vygotsky, 1978). Teachers have reported surprise upon watching videotaped clips of children in their program identified with special needs who were successfully demonstrating skills from their Individual Education Plans (IEPs) during play (A. Sullivan, personal communication, August 10, 1997). For example, a male child with an identified delay in personal-social skill development demonstrated social skills while playing with a female play partner that were considered beyond his competence level by the team who diagnosed him. When given the freedom to play in a natural setting with a self-chosen play partner, he performed “above his head.” Effective observation techniques are powerful tools available to early childhood teachers for purposes of curriculum planning, communicating with parents, and identifying children with special needs. The power of observation lies in the positive impact it can have on children.

### How to Observe and Record

There are many strategies for recording children at play. For example, Diane chose to do a running record of children entering play twice a week at playtime using videotaped recordings. Another teacher may use anecdotal records as a form of recording his observations of children’s object substitution during dramatic play. Before choosing the best observation and recording strategy, it is necessary to take the following steps:

1. **Choose a naturalistic, familiar, and informal setting.** One reason observation is so effective is that it allows children to be assessed during their natural play activities rather than in a contrived environment. The child’s

### Identifying children with special needs

Observation and recording
Although these strategies are divided into four types, I believe they overlap one another when applied in the classroom setting. The teacher learns to trust herself to adapt the chosen strategy to meet her particular purposes. For example, I favor anecdotal records for several reasons. First, they yield specific information, yet are open-ended and flexible. This open-ended attribute allows for unexpected findings to emerge. And second, anecdotal records are a realistic strategy for a busy and overextended teacher.

Imagine that you are a teacher of a five year old group of children. You are collecting data on their interests in order to select a class project responsive to the children (Jones & Nimmo, 1994). After recording anecdotal records for two weeks, you and your aide both read over the data and find that the children as a group have an interest in cats, both domestic and wild. You decide to launch a project that explores cat characteristics and habitats. The following anecdotal record is a sample:

Mark arrives at school about 8:00 am with his father. He runs up to Dan at the puzzle table and says, “Look, Dan! My dad brought me a tiger shirt from the San Diego Zoo.” Dan replies, “So... I have a cheetah poster in my bedroom.” (10/02/97)

Each anecdotal record is dated and contains the specific information surrounding the incident in which an interest is expressed or explored. Additional information beyond the children’s interests, such as special friendships, is revealed through the anecdotal record approach.
Observing and Recording Play Promotes the Teacher-As-Researcher Role

Observations of children have the potential to contribute to the field by affirming or calling established practice into question. For example, Diane’s play entry study affirmed the notion that play entry skills were linked to social competence. Her finding that the successful bids resulted from nonverbal observing and modeling strategies called into question the “ask if you can play” practice recommended in the literature.

Observing can be thought of as a form of data collection for the teacher who is engaging in research. Literally thousands of questions about young children’s play remain unanswered. Just as Diane posed her question about play entry strategies, other teachers can pursue answers to their research questions by observing and recording children at play. With time and practice, Diane grew to see herself as a teacher researcher. In fact, she found a new question emerged from her play entry study. Now she wants to look at how children sustain play. The teacher-as-researcher cycle involves asking the question, observing and recording to find the answer, reflecting on the findings, and then generating a new question to explore.

Vivian Paley, a kindergarten teacher in the Chicago Lab School for many years, is an excellent model for the teacher-as-researcher concept in preschool and kindergarten. She has written nine books about young children at play. Each book answers a different question but all are aimed at documenting the child’s way of thinking or the child’s perspective. Paley recognized that through careful observation of children, her curriculum could become more child centered. Her book, You can’t say you can’t play (1992) is the story of her approach to the phenomenon of peer rejection in play.

Teacher researchers have the potential to contribute to the body of knowledge about young children’s play. They have access to the children who are playing in a naturalistic setting and who are constantly demonstrating the process of learning through play. All we need to do as teacher researchers is learn to ask the right questions and make a plan for observing and recording as a way to find the answers.

References and Recommended Resources


The drama center has been transformed into a hospital. Gowns, masks, plastic gloves, bandages, Q-tips, stethoscope, flashlight, cradle, blanket, clipboards with paper, pencils, and a toy telephone are the props used by children as they engage in sociodramatic play.

Thomas says, “If you don’t take care of me, I’m going to die.”

Tory — Writes out a prescription on the clipboard.
Thomas — “Let’s go fast, I’m going to die.”
Tory — “I need to write everything.”
Marissa and Tanika — Both girls are playing with the doctor’s bag.
Tory — Finishes his report. Picks up a Q-tip to check Marissa for head lice. He looks in her eye.
Tory says, “You have an eye infection.”
Tanika takes the role of Marissa’s mother.
Tory — “Moms are not allowed in the office.”
Marissa — “I want my mommy.”
Tory examines Marissa and says, “Just one lump. Rubber bands are pulling on it. You need medicine.”
Tory gives Marissa a shot.

This is a typical pretend play scene in my early childhood classroom. Children are learning about the world of hospitals through play. It is important to try to capitalize on this natural inclination by providing the time and materials needed for play. In describing NAEYC’s developmentally appropriate practices Bredekamp states: “The child’s active participation in self-directed play with concrete, real-life experiences continues to be a key to motivated meaningful learning in kindergarten.
and the early grades” (Bredekamp, 1987, p. 4). Many parents, administrators, and teachers think because children are in school, they should be doing school things. Parents typically ask, “What did you do in school today?” Children in developmentally appropriate early childhood classrooms, where play is seen as a vehicle for developing literacy, math and social skills, would probably reply, “We played!” This may cause parents to feel anxious because they do not fully understand or value the role of play in the early childhood curriculum, although they value and promote play at home. We need to help parents and administrators understand the differences in play.

Play in Child Care Programs

Here are some differences between children’s play at home and early childhood programs that we can share with parents and administrators:

Group Size — Children learn to play in larger groups in child care programs. While some children may still engage in solitary or parallel play, their play takes place in the context of a larger group. A child at home couldn’t organize a hospital episode or any early childhood circle game.

Materials and Equipment — Child care settings provide children with sand tables, water tables, woodworking tools, and easels. Clay and paint are sometimes considered too messy for home use. Many parents purchase commercial toys for their children. In child care programs, children can create, design, and invent their own materials.

Space — Indoor space is not limited to a bedroom, living room, or family room. Children in classroom settings have more space to engage in block play or sociodramatic play. Children can create a block structure and revisit it the following day! Children at home usually have limited outdoor space and equipment. Homes have swing sets and sand boxes, in comparison to play areas in child care centers equipped with outdoor apparatus for climbing and rings and bars for swinging. Children living in urban areas have limited opportunities to play outdoors, especially in inclement weather.

Time — In developmentally appropriate programs, play is an integral part of the day. Play is scheduled on a daily basis. At home, a parent is busy with household chores. Some families with busy schedules may skip play altogether.

Adult/Child Interaction — Teachers can facilitate, expand, and scaffold children’s play in child care programs. Vygotsky (1978) believes that learning leads development. According to his theory, learning is most effective when it takes place within the children’s zone of proximal development. The zone of proximal development is the area between a child’s level of independent performance and assisted performance. For example, a child is playing with teddy bear counters. The teacher observes the child playing with the counters and assists by suggesting the child count, sort, and graph the bears by color or shape. Parents would probably not guide and discuss many playful discoveries with their children.

To eliminate misconceptions of play in schools, early childhood educators first need to help parents and administrators understand the differences between play at home and child care settings. Then we need to help parents and administrators recognize the way the play-oriented classroom supports learning. I write monthly newsletters and conduct workshops on topics such as early literacy or manipulative math. Many parents and/or grandparents can rearrange their schedules to volunteer an hour a week. I invite two parents or grandparents every day to participate in my room during play time for one hour each week.

Mechanisms to document play to parents are anecdotal descriptions of children’s progress, photography, audiotapes, videotapes, and work samples. More recently, I am integrating Reggio Emilia’s approach to documenting children’s play and experiences through panels accompanied by explanatory notes, samples of children’s work and transcripts of children’s conversations.

Anecdotal Notes

In my classroom I try to observe children every day. Carol Seefeldt believes the best way to assess an individual child is through direct observation. “Observing is probably the oldest, most frequently used and most rewarding method of assessing children, their growth, development, and learning.” (Seefeldt, 1990, p. 313).

Children play in the block center every day for at least an hour during activity time. Dr. Drew Discovery Blocks as well as Caroline Pratt unit blocks are arranged on book shelves and in crates. I provide a wealth of block accessories to add stimulation, aesthetic beauty, and dramatic play content. Literature related to building is left in the block center as reference material for classroom architects and mathematicians.

For many children building and constructing is the most comfortable way to represent thinking. You observe children talking to each other about their struc-
As you watch children play, write down what children do or say verbatim. Record the date, time, and setting. While watching, jot down enough information to get the basic story and most significant details. It is important in anecdotal records to keep information factual rather than subjective.

**Photography**

Keep a camera loaded with film to photograph your child’s thinking and learning while playing. Photographs communicate to children, parents, and administrators the process of how knowledge is constructed. They also let children know you value their play by providing a sense of permanence to their creativity. Photography provides opportunities for you and your children to look at and talk about play, long after blocks have been put back on the block shelves or sand toys put away in the sand box.

**Audiotapes**

Make audiotape recordings while children are playing. Taping your children’s verbal communications will provide you with information about their language skills, as well as their development as cooperative players and problem solvers. It is useful to use audiotapes while taking anecdotal notes.

**Videotapes**

Videotaping play in the classroom and on the playground can be a passageway into learning about children’s spontaneous play, their social interactions and development and physical changes. It is important that we ask children’s permission before videotaping their play. Videotapes, as well as audiotapes, support our observations of children. It is impossible to see and record everything a child does and says while engaged in play! Technology assisted observations increase the accuracy of recording children’s thinking and problem solving.
You can make video prints of those special playful
moments if you use an 8mm video camera and have an
audiovisual computer. Video prints can also be made
from a Sony color video printer (CVP–M3). Tape field
trips, story retellings, block structures, dramatic play,
and outdoor play. Try videotaping the children a few
times; and share the tapes at parent meetings, so that
parents can observe their children’s learning through
play.

Work Samples

Children’s own work is the most authentic form of doc-
umentation of play and learning. Save all signs and
labels children write and draw as they build structures
or play in the drama center. Work samples can provide
concrete information about development in literacy,
creativity, problem-solving, and fine-motor skills.
You can save the originals or make photocopies of
children’s writing and artwork. I often take photo-
graphs of a child using woodworking tools to make a
math geoboard or sorting and classifying colored
macaroni. It is important to date each work sample
and create a portfolio or folder for each child.

Document at ion Panels

Many early childhood educators observe and record
children’s learning and development. Over the past six
years interest in the preschool programs (for ages 3–6)
of Reggio Emilia, Italy, has grown. Although early
childhood educators have been practicing observation
techniques for decades, we are just beginning to closely
examine Reggio Emilia’s use of extensive documenta-
tion. “Documentation in Reggio Emilia schools focuses
on children’s experiences, memories, thoughts, and
ideas in the course of their work. It typically includes
samples of a child’s work at several different stages of
completion, photographs showing work in progress,
comments written by the teacher or other adults work-
ing with the children, transcriptions of children’s
discussions, and comments made by parents (Katz and
Chard, 1996).

I hang presentation boards at children’s eye level
outside my room. On these boards the process and
product of children’s learning are shared with children,
parents, colleagues, administrators, and visitors. Below
are some essential elements to keep in mind when
creating a documentation panel:

1. Focus on children’s engagement in meaningful
experiences (i.e., a project, a field trip,
working with clay, playing with
blocks).

2. Select photographs that relate to the experience
being described.

3. Provide information related to the process as well
as completed products.

4. Include samples of children’s work.

5. Include a verbatim dialogue of children’s
discussions or responses by parents and/or
teachers.

6. The aesthetic presentation of the panel is very
important. Use a computer for text and enlarge
photographs with a color copier. Mount text,
photographs, and work samples on construction
paper.

The challenge of adults today for the children of
tomorrow is to allow the child to be a child, to do
cild-like things, and to value their play at home and
in child care settings. Documentation of play provides
us with an understanding of how children construct
knowledge. As we watch and document children
making discoveries with blocks, paints, and earth-
worms, we are supporting the future architect, artist,
and scientist of tomorrow.

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