

It's Not "Just Play"

It's easy to look at a child building with wooden blocks or two friends in dress-up clothes creating a little drama for themselves and say that these children are "just playing." But if we watch closely, if we really observe the details of their activity, we can see that what they are doing is much more than "just playing."

Consider the block play, for example. Look at the fort the child is constructing. Notice how the four sides of the fort are all equal in length. Now look at how the child made the sides equal. On one side he used a single, long block and on the opposite side four smaller ones. Each of the smaller ones is $\frac{1}{4}$ the size of the longer one; children are working with fractions when they are "just playing" with blocks. They can also be dealing with measurement. Watch how the child stands up and sees how high the fort is compared with his body. He is using his body just like we might use a ruler. You might have also noticed how this child began his play with the blocks; he collected them together and grouped them according to size. After that he counted how many blocks he had in each group. He discovered that he had four sets of three blocks each. This is very similar to what we do when we multiply two numbers together, for example, 4×3 . And if you visually divide his fort down the middle, you would see that each side is identical to the other, very much like an arithmetic problem where one side of the equation has to equal the other side. It turns out children are doing arithmetic when they are "just playing."

Now consider the two children playing make-believe and dress-up. They have removed themselves from the here and now and are imagining themselves in another time and place. Listen to how their voices change when they are pretending to be the various characters in their story. In their role-playing they are exercising the very important skill of considering the perspective of others. When one of them is "hurt" in their make-believe world, listen to the comforting sounds coming from her co-player; those are the sounds of empathy.

In order for these two children to maintain their role-play, they will have to cooperate with each other and negotiate when differences arise, for example, when one of them wants the story to go in a particular direction and the other player has an alternative idea. They will have to problem-solve their differences, once again needing to consider the opinion and perspective of another person. In the process of negotiating and problem-solving, they will have to marshal up their best language skills to make their ideas understood. It turns out that children are practicing and developing some very important life skills when they are "just playing."

Block play, dress-up play, sand play, puzzle play, doll play - all of these "just playing" activities will reveal that very important cognitive, emotional, physical, and social developments are occurring if we just look closely enough. And once we recognize how significant "just playing" is in the lives of young children, we will understand why it is vitally important that we provide the time, materials, and space that children need to "just play."

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