

“Do children learn here, or do they just play all day?”

This was a question asked on a tour by a parent, and has been asked by many parents in various forms over my years of showing the preschool to prospective families. To answer it fully, I must first answer an essential question, “How do children best learn?” Educational theorists from the time of Socrates to present day have seen the value of play in the education of young minds. In an article, “Education in Plato’s Republic” Socrates is quoted as saying, “Don't use force in training the children in the studies, but rather play. In that way you can better discern what each is naturally directed towards”. In the 2400 years since, most respected educational theorists have spoken of the value of play as a tool for learning during early childhood education. John Dewey (1859-1952) recommended that teachers create a dramatic play area where children could learn through dramatizing real life experiences, such as cooking and carpentry. He went on to say that the role of the teacher was to encourage the imagination of the child, plan around children’s interests, and incorporate traditional subject matter into their experiences.

At Children’s House, the dramatic play area is an essential learning tool for all of the children. The area’s environment is created around the theme of the current Storybook Journey. In many schools, dramatic play will be an area with standard, real life situations and dress up, such as a small kitchen with cooking utensils, aprons, mops, brooms, pretend silverware and crockery, and assorted plastic food items or things which children can use to represent food. With many preschools, this is an area that never changes, and while offering the chance for experimental “real world” play, doesn’t go beyond the basic premise that children like playing “house”. At Children’s House, dramatic play is seen as an area that is dynamic and changes throughout the year to promote learning in all different areas.

When “community” is the theme of a Storybook Journey, the room may have an area that could be a kitchen, a market, construction area and office of some kind. Props could include blocks for building, kitchen implements, phones and computer keyboards, food and baskets, and a myriad of items common to everyday living in our society: dress up clothing would be suit jackets and ties, chef outfits, dresses and purses and other adult themed clothing. However when the theme is “polar world”, the room is transformed with props based around stuffed arctic animals and their habitats, blocks covered in white paper to represent icebergs, and to be used to build igloos, and sleds; dress up would be furs and different materials for children to become various polar animals, or dress like an Inuit. The science area may have buckets of snow, and a choice of colored food dyes for children to experiment with the effects of mixing different colors.

The most essential skill that children need to learn when coming to preschool is that ability to be part of a group, and how to operate as an individual within that group. Social and emotional health is paramount in creating a learning environment for any child. Lev Vyotsky wrote that in dramatic play children get to learn social rules, as their eagerness to participate in prolonged play requires them to adapt and work within the unwritten rules of the game. This leads to a greater ability to self-regulate their behavior, learn sharing techniques and delayed gratification, as well as how to operate within a group dynamic. Piaget believed that pretend play gave children the ability to identify

with taking control of real life experiences, which they normally would have no control over, such as going to the doctors. This strengthens their ability to mentally picture different situations, and enhances their ability to engage in symbolic play. Research from around the world has proven that children who are able to engage in dramatic play with free choice activities and supportive environments in preschool, show increased cognitive and language skills than peers by the age of seven.

In the Reggio Emilia approach to learning, the environment is considered the “third teacher”. We pride ourselves on making sure that this teacher is a well-prepared, crucial element in the child’s learning. Each Friday, all of the staff meets to plan the following week’s activities. We dedicate a minimum of three hours to analyzing children’s play, deciding which items are active and holding interest and what could be introduced to the classroom to make the play more meaningful. We research topics and share language that can elevate the play, as well as discussing the different children, and different classes to come up with strategies to fully engage every child.

Teachers play a vital role in transforming play into meaningful learning. Our Director, Elaine McCarthy explains the role of the teacher in dramatic play as “Active listener, then active engagement of how to tie in fact books, experiences, and science, to bring together all the webs of how we are trying to present a certain months curriculum...Storybook journey is about making bridges: finding what children are playing and bridging them to the topic that surrounds them. If children are building a castle while we are studying space, you could ask “If you looked out the windows what would you see in the stars?” Have the bridge be reliant on the teacher not telling them what not to do; it’s about how to bridge their play within the topic. To enable this process, teachers must capitalize on children’s motivations of their first interest, tie in all the information around them by posters, songs, food, science experiments, and make it personal. Build on human stories, it can’t be outside information that you want students to retain, it has to be first hand.” Children would learn very little about the world if just placed in a room with objects and no guidance. Teachers are there to encourage and add language, give information, guide play, and set up scenarios, which extend their learning.