

Play It Again

Play is not just a fun way to learn, it also develops social and cognitive skills



It has been said time and again that children learn best through play. Yet many preschools have found it difficult to implement this. Parents tend not to buy into the philosophy, and are often of the view that preschools need to prepare their child for Primary One instead.

This view has resurfaced to be examined. In his National Day rally speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced that children should play more. He added that bringing the Primary 1 curriculum into the kindergarten classroom is not ideal for children and their learning journey.

A recent report by Alison Gopnik, a leading thinker in early childhood further validates the significance of play in early childhood. In her article Gopnik suggests that babies and toddlers learn in some of the same ways as scientists. “The way we determine how they’re learning is that we give them, say, a pattern of data, a pattern of probabilities or statistics about the world and then we see what they do,” Gopnik said in a summary released by the National Science Foundation. “We found that like scientists, they tested hypotheses ... and determined which one was more likely.”

This finding is significant. It reinforces the fact that young children learn best through play; that children construct knowledge through a process of active engagement with the world around them. The play that children engage in must be rich and purposeful. It is play in which children should be encouraged to develop not just knowledge and academic skills but the skills to collaborate, negotiate and think critically and creatively in their interactions with their peers, adults and the community at large.

Play is the natural way children learn, why therefore do we hear sceptics ask “Play is fine. But when do they learn?”

According to Leanne Sunarya, Senior PreSchool Director at EtonHouse International Pre-School Orchard : “The question stems from the adult perception of “play” - the thing we do in our spare time when we are not working. We strongly believe that this definition needs to be redefined. We recognise that play is the work of childhood and are inspired in our practice by the current data being explored by researchers throughout the world.”

Dr Stuart Brown, a pioneer in the field of play, is finding through his research that play is more than a joyful and energising experience. In fact it is deeply involved with human development and intelligence, and not just in children! He attests:

“We are built to play and built through play. When we play we are engaged in the purest expression of our humanity, the truest expression of our individuality”.

Play is important in the development of the child’s understanding of the world and the development of their relationships with people, places and materials. Learning is the result of making connections between prior experiences and new experiences and a child explores these connections when they play.

Brain research over the years also validates the significance of these connections and relationships that children develop in the early years and how they determine, to a large extent, a child’s personality in the future. Emelia Prayogo, Director of Pedagogy at EtonHouse shares her views:

Studies on brain development in infants and toddlers emphasise the influence that early experience has on the maturing of the right brain. During the last semester of the prenatal period, and through to the end of the second year of life, the right hemisphere - which is largely responsible for emotional and social functioning - undergoes a growth spurt. According to Greenspan, “it is the pleasure and delight that babies get from interaction with people that drives them to relate to people more frequently and more skillfully” (Greenspan, 1990). Recent neuroscience has validated Greenspan’s clinical findings with hard science showing that a baby’s emotional need to build, sustain and use relationships drives communication and motivates language use (Schore, 2005; Schore 2001). In other words, the avenue for shaping the brain is relationships.



What is also important to understand about the learning in infants and toddlers is that they are not trying to learn one particular skill or set of facts; instead, according to Gopnik, a leading researcher in the field of infant cognition, “They are drawn to anything new, unexpected, or informative”. This type of early learning is often “invisible” and hence, taken for granted.

Infants and toddlers do not learn through the same adult-directed way that one might imagine as he teaches a child the multiplication tables or how to read. Their learning is very much based on discovery, and the role of both parents and educators is to ensure that the physical and social environment is set up for that process to happen in a way that children feel safe to take on new challenges.

With contributions from Leanne Sunarya, Senior Pre-School Director, Emelia Prayogo, Director of Pedagogy and Bipasha Minocha Group Brand Director of EtonHouse International Education Group.