

Play as a natural, spontaneous, nutritious and pleasant experience

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“Play is often spoken of as a break from serious learning. But for boys [and girls] play is serious learning. Play is the work of childhood” (Rogers, s/f, cited in Domínguez, 2001, p.186).

“Play is not just children's games, it is a way to use the mind and even better, an attitude about how to use the mind. It is a framework in which things are put to the test, a greenhouse in which to combine thought, language and fantasy” (Bruner, 1984)

In speaking of our childhood, it is a recurrent theme that many memories are associated with moments of play because it generates pleasurable experiences that are registered in our memory. García (1995) defines play as “(...) action or voluntary activity, accomplished within limits certain time and place, in accordance with a freely accepted but absolutely imperative rule, provided with an end in itself, accompanied by a feeling of tension and joy” (p.126).

There are multiple investigations into play that have been addressed by various areas of knowledge such as education, psychology, anthropology, among others. Despite the background and empirical evidence increasing the value of play in the personal and social development of children and young people, only a superficial idea or a total lack of awareness of its special value in childhood can be observed on a daily basis.

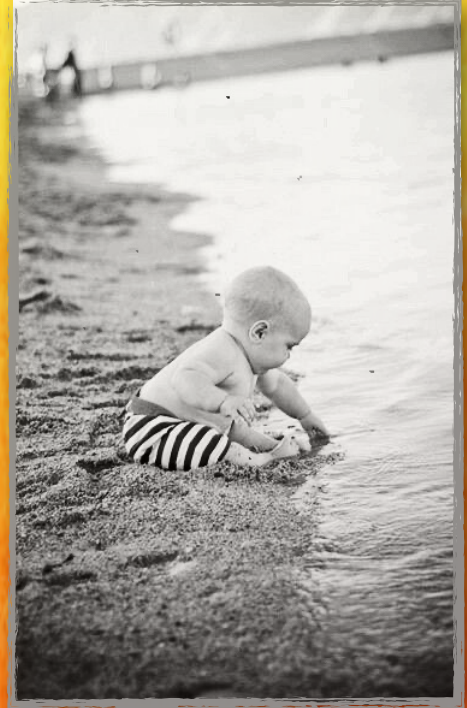
It is necessary to understand that play has diverse perspectives of analysis. This document invites you to reflect closely on the role of toys, and the signals or messages associated with these, think carefully about disability and the access to games, to finally reflect on what the considerations are in education systems.

Play...

Play arises from the first year of life, according to Linaza (2013), the first games that are performed appear with the control that is achieved from the body itself when starting to suck, grab or hit different objects, thus the so-called motor games or circular relationships emerge, in which new skills acquired as a result of the natural process of development and interaction with the environment are exercised. Along with the growth of the children, movements that are spontaneous or poorly controlled start disappearing and some more coordinated movements start to show due to the maturity of the nervous system and its impact on motor development. The surroundings which are an unknown scenario for the boy and girl, are attractive, and perceived and discovered through the senses, sensing little by little a part of it, interacting with objects, people and other elements; a natural interaction which allows for the emergence of new forms of play.

For a long time researchers and precursors of early childhood education have ascribed significant value to play, especially in education, indicating that this develops the understanding of the mind, as noted by Lopez (2010):

Any boy's [and girl's] abilities develop more effectively in play than outside of it. There is no difference between play and learning, because any game that presents new demands on the boy [or girl] has been considered a learning opportunity: what is more, the game teaches with remarkable ease because they are especially predisposed to receive that which the playful activity offers them, and to which they dedicate themselves with pleasure (p. 24).



According to Brower (1988 cited in Meneses y Monje, 2001) play is not a luxury, necessity for every boy and girl in development, Hetzer (1992) indicates that it constitutes the best basis for a healthy, successful and full adulthood. Despite this evidence many adults do not recognize the value of play, saying it represents a waste of time and do not believe in the function which it exercises, thus forcing boys and girls to do activities unsuitable for their age. For many children the development of natural and spontaneous play is limited due to false beliefs, a lack of visibility of the various forms of play or a devaluation of play as a vital element in the full development of people.

The Base Curriculum for Early Years Education] (MINEDUC, 2018), the guiding document of educational practices for initial levels in Chile, understands play as a principle:

Play is, in Early Childhood Education, a central concept. It refers as much to a child's natural activity as to a privileged pedagogical strategy. According to classic authors of development and learning, play has a driving role in the development of higher cognitive functions, of emotion, socialization and creative adaptation to reality. Play is, at the same time, an expression of development and learning and conditioning for them. There are countless activities that can be called play in toddlers at different ages, from touching, hitting, manipulating, putting everything in their mouths, gathering leaves or stones, piling things up, inserting rings, riding a broomstick, imitating mother, up to participating in a dramatization, in games and activities with certain rules (MINEDUC, 2018, p.32).

Literature and curriculum guidelines demonstrate the value of play and its support in childhood development, although in this one can still find a number of barriers and beliefs that hinder natural development.



Gender stereotypes and false beliefs...

Do all girls pretend to be princesses or all boys enjoy cars? The answer is no, from an early age their play is influenced by toys that reproduce gendered roles from adult life or respond to the beliefs of the adults who usually associate girls with calm activities playing games associated with household tasks or delicate activities like playing princesses, on the other hand, the games for boys are associated with the strength and movement such as superheroes or sports. Many of the beliefs associated with toys reproduce patriarchal patterns, this concept is also associated with social, political, economic and religious organizations in which there are roles defined by gender with a marked imbalance in the relations of power between men and women, strongly oriented and inclined to the former (Facio and Fries, 2005).

The classification of games or toys by sex limits free play, restricting choice, it is common to hear that there are toys for boys and girls, even unisex toys are classified by sexist color, usually pink for the girls and blue for the boys. It is necessary to reflect and analyze the role of toys in their game, we can ask ourselves: are dolls or household utensils just toys for girls? Playing with a ball or with dinosaurs is just a game for boys? These simple questions can help you think about choosing a toy and how it impacts the child's play. This allows us to move towards a denaturation of the gender stereotypes associated with games and toys. Until now many toy stores, fathers, mothers, educators and caregivers promote a discourse through their actions that perpetuates stereotypical roles reproducing the discrimination. It is important that the moment of selecting a toy is a contribution to the game, that promotes enjoyment, creativity and allows the participation of all, without discrimination between boys and girls.



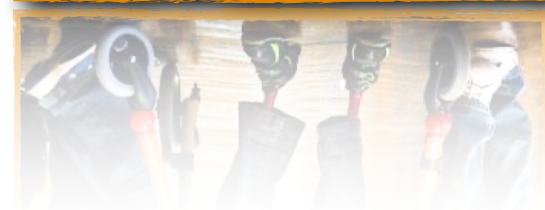
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Can all boys and girls play?

Play is a natural activity in children, pleasurable, which reveals their thoughts and interests to us and enriches their connection to and understanding of the world that surrounds them, which becomes a useful tool for enhancing learning and development. However, not all boys and girls can develop play naturally, children with disabilities find it difficult to experiment with play and experience it because the social and educational system presents a series of barriers that limit their access. For example, many of the toys market have limited structures regarding their use and handling, which is an obstacle for a boy or girl who has motor difficulty.

Most squares or parks do not have toys adapted or designed for boys and girls with less autonomy or with various forms of access to information, for example, there is no instruction in Braille or a guide to orient a blind child. Because of the wide variety of motor, cognitive, sensory, perceptual and relational impairments, it is difficult to establish general guidelines or that would be useful for all (INADI, s/f). Therefore, the first challenge in this area is greater and the first step is to visualize the permanent or transient needs of these boys and girls, keeping in mind that it is essential to individualize adaptations, reducing the barriers, creating spaces and offering flexible toys, able to adapt to the needs of a child, always promoting the opportunity to play, exercising deliberation and autonomy.



Education and play, is play allowed to enter the classroom?



If we think of how many opportunities boys and girls have to play at school it is likely that we might identify a few moments of instances of play as some educators or teachers understand that play is incompatible with their curricular contents or are

unaware of the value of play as an opportunity to learn. Our school system is characterized by being focused on the teaching of results-oriented competencies, undervaluing the playful process or the possibilities of offering time for free play, ignoring the skills and experiences that are experienced along the way (Hirtt, s/f, cited in Beluche, 2013). This educational phenomenon is very common in neoliberal societies, centered on obtaining measurable results, so that the learning process is invisible, thus, play is not a permissible tool because of its uncertain fate and little chance to homogeneously evaluate children in such scenarios. For Flinchum (1988), play provides the child with the freedom to release their pent-up energy, foster interpersonal skills, and helps them find a place in the social world. Boys and girls show us what they know and what they want to learn by playing, they learn to establish social relationships with their peers, problems of age arise and are resolved.

Why is it relevant to promote play in the classroom? Play is an experience able to promote learning (Bongiorno, 2018), such as cognitive, social, emotional, linguistic and motor skills, this is because play and learning are deeply connected activities, the possibilities offered by play in the school area is an opportunity to develop potential that goes beyond what is defined in the prescribed, implemented or evaluated curriculum. Play is a learning tool in itself, so it is necessary to create spaces in the classroom that encourage free and spontaneous play. To incorporate it in the classroom – it must not have as its sole objective the acquisition of certain content curriculum - play should be an opportunity for learning for children and (re)building multiple understandings, skills and attitudes, identifying the most adequate strategies for solving problems, developing their creativity, practicing tolerance and being freer and happier (Bernabeu and Goldstein, 2010).

According to Las Bases Curriculares de la Educación Parvularia [The Base Curriculum for Early Years Education] (MINEDUC, 2018):

“(…) in kindergartens, the governing activity is play, in which context the interaction is restructured to allow the young learner to develop creativity, social skills and norms, as well as broader knowledge of their environment. At transition levels, educational play continues to be the predominant pedagogical approach, but it is inserted in a culture with which it must dialogue” (p.32).

For these reasons, it is extremely necessary that educators reflect closely on how to promote play in their educational spaces, some key questions are: is play an ally or is it absent in my classroom? How does it provide or contribute to the learning that I have proposed to develop? Is it an opportunity for pleasure and connection between the young learners? These are some of the questions that can help rethink the role of play in the classroom.

Finally, it is important to remember that play, as well as being an educational strategy as an innate appearance in the child, enhances the whole development in the areas of social, language,

autonomy, cognition, emotional and motor skills, and even as a powerful therapeutic tool. The challenge is to consider whether the opportunities offered by the adults, be they fathers, mothers, teachers, caregivers or other professionals allow all boys and girls to have the opportunity to enjoy themselves in a free and spontaneous way. For example: Are we capable of delivering proposals for spaces, objects and toys for all the boys and girls in ways that exercise their right to free, spontaneous and creative play? What value does play have in our lives? These are vital questions in the moment of thinking about play as a key tool in the comprehensive development of the child.

Play is the most pleasant activity that the human being has. From birth until having use of reason, play has been and is the axis that moves expectations to seek a time of rest and relaxation. Hence, boys [and girls] should not be deprived of play because with it they develop and strengthen their experiential field, their expectations are maintained, and their interests are focused on meaningful learning. Play, taken as entertainment, softens the rough edges and difficulties of life, for this reason it eliminates stress and promotes rest. Play in the classroom serves to strengthen values: honesty, loyalty, fidelity, cooperation, solidarity with friends, and with the group, respect for others and for their ideas, love and tolerance. It also fosters traits such as self-control, safety, attention - you must be vigilant to understand the rules and not break them, reflection, the search for alternatives or solutions that favor a position, curiosity, initiative, imagination and common sense, because all these values facilitate incorporation into the life of a citizen. (Torres and Torres, 2007, p.116).



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