



1

Cari Ebert, MS, CCC-SLP

- Pediatric speech-language pathologist (SLP) in Kansas City
- Professional speaker
- Author
- Product developer
- Parent of an autistic child
- Early childhood specialist
- Defender of play
- 13-year breast cancer survivor



2

Cari's Podcast



3

Q: Why are we here today?

A: To gain a better understanding and appreciation of the power of play-based learning in the development of young children.

- Have you noticed that true play seems to be disappearing?
- Children today have access to a new type of play called *screen-based play*.
- Screen-based play is changing the landscape of childhood in an unprecedented manner.

4



Young children are spending more and more time on handheld devices...and less time learning naturally through play

5

The shift in childhood: *from sandboxes to screens*



Starting around 2015 we have seen a significant shift from a play-based childhood to a screen-based childhood

6

Young Children Need Varied Experiences

7

How Young Children Learn

- Young children learn best in the context of everyday routines and activities



- Young children learn through social interactions with the important people in their lives

8

- Young children learn and develop through hands-on, sensory-rich experiences (they learn by *doing*)



9

- Young children learn and develop through play



10



Play is essential to development because it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth.

-American

Academy of Pediatrics, 2007

www.pediatrics.org/cgi/doi/10.1542/peds.2006-2697

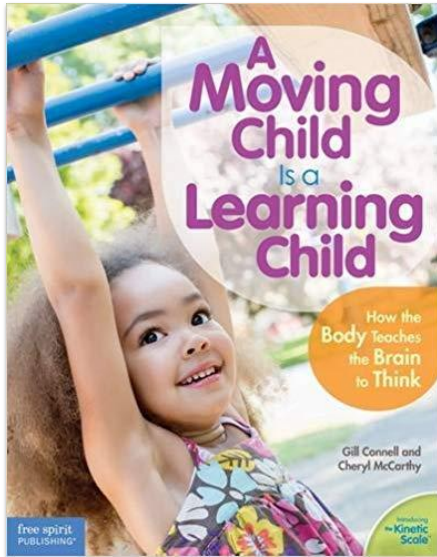
11



Play-based movement is critical to learning and development!



12



Cari's Favorite
Book for Early
Childhood
Providers

13



Hand-held screen time leads to a
lack of play-based movement

14

True play is...

1. Child-directed activity sparked by curiosity and joy
2. Relevant and meaningful to the child
3. Creative and imaginative
4. Actively engaging
5. Learning naturally through discovery and exploration
6. More about the process than the end product



15

Play is about the process

(not about following directions or doing it the “right” way)



16



Process Art (creative and imaginative)

Product Art (following directions)



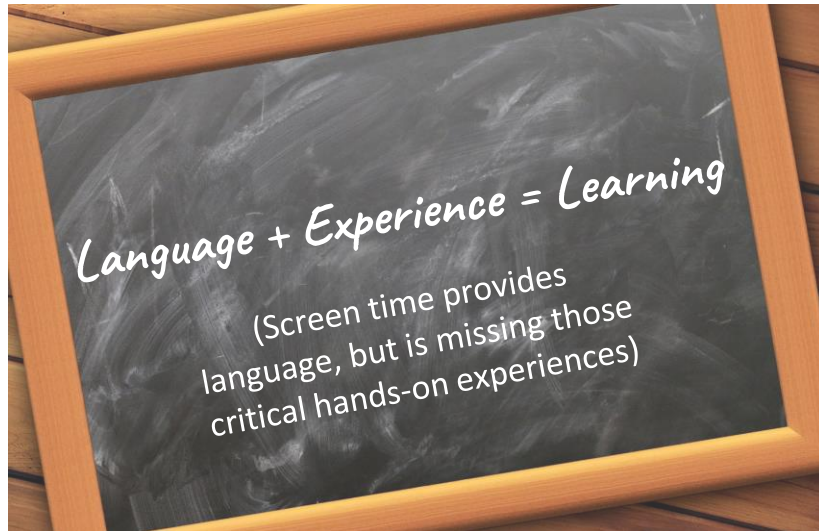
17

Email Cari received from an early childhood teacher

In our 4-year-old classrooms we don't have many opportunities for play. Our preschool teachers use more adult-directed activities vs. child led play. Our teachers also tend to do a lot of direct instruction. We even have one preschool teacher who tells her students what colors they should use in their pictures...it's very structured.

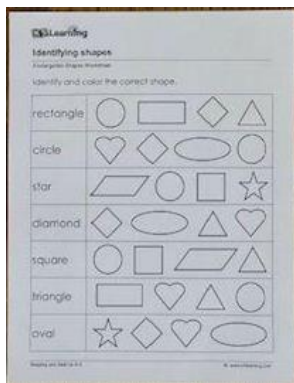
18

Formula for Learning



19

Teaching shapes: Worksheet vs. learning through experiences


















20

Limitations of Worksheets (AI overview)

- Worksheets discourage children from working together and forming social connections
- Worksheets are designed to be completed quickly with an emphasis on short-term success, not long-term learning and deeper understanding
- Worksheets limit creativity, divergent thinking, and mental flexibility and lead children to believe there is only one correct way to complete a task

Name: _____ Date: _____

I use my five senses in different ways.
Draw the sense organ you will use for each group.

			Smell
			Sight
			Hearing
			Touch
			Taste

21

- Worksheets may not be suitable for all learners, and can be a significant barrier for children who struggle with reading
- Worksheets do not take into account each child's individual strengths and needs and assume every child is in the same place on their journey
- Worksheets teach rote skills out of context and don't provide meaningful learning opportunities
- Worksheets may become too easy to fall back on for the teaching staff

"If they can do the worksheet, they don't need it. If they can't, it won't help them." -Marilyn Adams

22

Limitations of Screen-Based Play

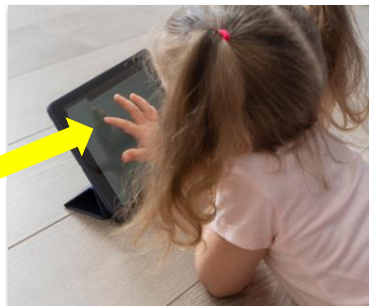
- Educational apps teach isolated language concepts out of context, but don't support functional communication skills
- Screens, especially in the evening, can disrupt sleep patterns
- Screen-based activities often provide structured entertainment and limit time for imaginative and creative play
- Young children can develop a reliance on screens for entertainment and for calming down and thus struggle with emotional regulation



23

- Fast-paced screen content can shorten attention spans and overstimulate young brains, making it harder to engage in slower, real-world activities
- It is difficult for young children with developing brains and bodies to gain communication, social, and motor skills while sitting sedentary in front of a screen

*iPad
finger*



24

Anything in front of
a screen is ALL **input**



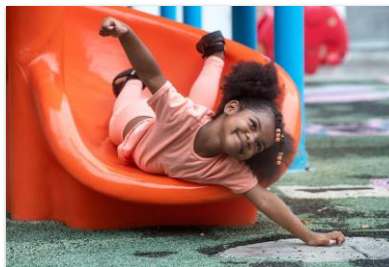
For learning and
development to occur,
there needs to be **input**
AND output



25

Question for Parents to Consider

*How many non-screen
experiences did my
child have today?*



26

Objections

- But Cari...things are different now...we live in a different world and today kids need to know how to work a smartphone and use a tablet
- But Cari, my 13-month-old is so smart...she can find her favorite videos on YouTube all by herself
- But Cari, my 5-year-old son can use my smartphone better than me...he's SO smart

27

Yes, times have changed!

*Phone 3-year-olds play
with today*



*Phone I played with
when I was 3*



28

Technological “know-how” is one type of intelligence, **but** young children also need to develop:

- communication skills
- social skills
- gross and fine motor skills
- self-help skills
- problem solving skills
- creativity and imagination
- self-regulation skills
- focus and attention
- problem solving skills

These skills are difficult to learn while sitting sedentary in front of a screen

29

Common Myths About Learning and Play

30

Myths About **Learning** and **Play**

Many adults believe that...

- Learning must be work
- Learning only occurs during adult-directed activities
- Play is frivolous, purposeless activity
- Play is what children do when they aren't learning
- Play skills come naturally to all children
- Children benefit most from educational toys
- High-tech toys are important for young children
- Academics should be emphasized as early as possible

31

Why are we in such a hurry to get 2-, 3-, and 4-year-olds ready for school? They have so much to learn right now...skills they need for tomorrow! We need to honor the stage children are in right now and stop focusing on getting them ready for kindergarten.



32

Nursing Home Preparedness Training for 54-year-old Cari



33

The Developmental Benefits of Play

34

Defending Play

- The word *play* is often used in a derogatory manner due to a lack of understanding regarding how young children learn best.
- Parent: *"We really like our child's preschool, but I think all they do there is just play. So we are now looking for a more academic focused preschool."*
- Play is not the enemy! Play is hands-on, minds-on learning.
- Defending play is best done by explaining the developmental benefits of learning through play.

35

Developmental Benefits of Play

(Adapted from the American Academy of Pediatrics)

- Play is essential for healthy brain development
- Play sparks creativity and curiosity
- Play supports development of the whole child (cognitive, language, social-emotional, motor)
- Play experiences provide learning opportunities
- Play helps children gain a better understanding of the world around them
- Through play, children learn *how* to learn
- Play is intrinsically motivating

36

"Learning can only happen when a child is interested. If he is not interested, it's like throwing marshmallows at his head and calling it eating."

Katrina Gatleben



37

- Play improves a child's ability to concentrate and focus even amidst distractions
- Play enhances problem solving skills
- Play helps children learn to deal with frustration
- Play fosters spontaneity and independence
- Play provides opportunities for children to make choices and take control of their own learning
- Play offers a variety of opportunities for testing boundaries and exploring risks
- Play builds confidence and self-esteem
- Play helps children learn how to make and keep friends

38

- Play provides sensory rich experiences
- Play is a fun and natural way to learn
- Play allows young children the opportunity to practice and master new skills (repetition is key to learning!)

Before you can do this...you need opportunities to play like this



39

Play gives children a chance to practice what they are learning.

Mr. Rogers



40

Play-Based Learning

- In the context of early childhood education, play-based learning is an engaging educational approach that allows children to learn naturally through discovery and exploration.
- Because play is intrinsically motivating, play-based learning helps children develop meaningful skills in meaningful ways.
- Learning through play is both educational and enjoyable.
- Play-based learning can be done through free play, guided play, or adult-directed games and activities.

41

Learning Continuum

from least to most structured



**Free
play**

**Child-led,
adult
guided
play**

**Adult designed
games and
playful
activities**

**Direct
instruction**

"Neuroscience and Learning Through Play: A Review of the Evidence"
Liu, Solis, Jensen, et al., 2017
The LEGO Foundation

42

Be a loud, proud defender of play!



T-shirt available at cariebert.com