

A Mandate for Playful Learning in Preschool: Presenting the Evidence

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek

Temple University

Roberta Michnick Golinkoff

University of Delaware

Laura E. Berk

Illinois State University

Dorothy G. Singer

Yale University

With foreword by Dr. Edward F. Zigler

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Executive Summary

Play has become a 4-letter word. In an effort to give children a head start on academic skills like reading and mathematics, play is discouraged and didactic learning is stressed. This book presents the scientific evidence in support of three points: 1) Children need both unstructured free play and playful learning under the gentle guidance of adults to best prepare them for entrance into formal school; 2) academic and social development are so inextricably intertwined that the former must not trump attention to the latter; and 3) learning and play are not incompatible; learning takes place best when children are engaged and enjoying themselves.

The argument is organized into three chapters. The first describes the current crisis in preschool education and suggests that the lack of attention to play and playful learning lies at its core. We propose that there exists a false and counterproductive dichotomy between play on the one hand and learning on the other. This dichotomy is echoed in society at large as parents are influenced by the media and the marketplace to buy “educational” toys and restrict free play. While supporting the need for accountability and assessment, we suggest that the current emphasis on assessment in higher grades has led to narrowly defined curricula objectives in the preschool. Curriculum development has been more responsive to the practical constraints of assessment than to the findings of evidence-based pedagogy.

The second chapter presents the evidence that play and playful learning enhance academic, social, and emotional outcomes in preschool. Playful learning, and not drill-and-practice, engages and motivates children in ways that enhance developmental outcomes and life-long learning. After defining play and playful learning, we examine

assumptions about how children learn and suggest that preschools are no longer teaching the “whole” child. The weight of the evidence, from random assignment to correlational to intervention studies, suggests that both free play and playful learning create optimal environments for achievement. Additionally, children in developmentally appropriate classrooms often show less anxiety and stronger social skills.

The epilogue moves from data to application, presenting seven principles that are derived from the science that inform preschool pedagogy. These principles reflect consensus across the learning sciences for how children learn best. If followed, these principles can contribute to the creation of preschools that will be equipped to educate the work force and citizenry for this new century.

Finally, the book ends with a set of recommendations for policy-makers. These recommendations are designed to translate the findings from the research into building excellent preschool programs that encourage family and community participation.

If we hope to prepare intelligent, socially skilled, creative thinkers for the global workplace of tomorrow, we must return play and playful learning to their rightful position in children’s lives.