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## The purpose of play: Why play matters

### In a world of increasing academic pressures on young children, is play-based learning still an important method for teaching young children?

Posted on **February 28, 2013** by [Carrie Shrier](#), Michigan State University Extension



Maria Montessori, famous for her work in early childhood education, once said, "Play is a child's work." In fact, her entire philosophy about preschool education and caring for children is based around this concept. However, in today's world of full-day Kindergarten, and increased academic expectations of our young children, many parents are left wondering, is play still as relevant and important as it once was?

[Michigan State University Extension](#) says the answer is "yes." It is through play that children learn about the world around them. Much is learned through a child's play, from social skills including appropriate peer interactions, to academic skills such as basic math through activities like as sorting. A well-planned play-based preschool can teach children all they need to know to be ready for Kindergarten through play.

Although it's extremely tempting for parents to demand skills based programming for their young children, in a desire to see them perform academically, research shows us that the critical social and emotional skills taught through play are a better indicator of long-term success, than early reading or other academic skills.

A good example of these skills includes self-regulation. An often-cited study conducted at Stanford University over 40 years ago, examined the impulse control of 4-year-olds left alone with a marshmallow. The children were given a marshmallow and told that if they waited to eat it, they could get a second one. About 30 percent of the children were able to wait for 15 minutes or longer and get that second marshmallow. When researchers followed up with the children in the study as teenagers and adults, they found that the group that waited, on average, were better adjusted as high schoolers, scored hundreds of points higher on their SAT's and were less likely to use drugs or be overweight.

How do we teach our children to resist temptation? To wait for that second marshmallow? Learning how to color within the lines or spending time completing work sheets, will not teach these self-regulation skills. Taking turns, sharing and cooperating in a classroom all help build these self-regulation skills. These skills are all learned through play.

Long-term studies have been done to show that the preschoolers in these play-based programs have improved academic scores and social/emotional skills as older children. A study conducted at the University of North Florida and published in the *Journal of Developmental Psychology*, by psychologist Rebecca Marcon, examined the long-term academic performance of over 700 preschoolers attending three different styles of preschools: Play-based, academic and those taking a middle of the road approach. Her research was clear that the children that attended play-based programs outperformed those in the academic group both socially and emotionally by the fourth grade. The play-based learning approach increased the children's ability to interact appropriately with their peers and to learn abstract concepts. "What we found in our research then and in ongoing studies is that children who were in a [play-based] preschool program showed stronger academic performance in all subject areas measured, compared to children who had been in more academically focused or more middle-of-the-road programs," says Marcon.

Furthermore, the short-term academic gains of those in the academic programs came with a consequence. The children in the academic programs were more likely to have behavior problems later on, be less enthusiastic and creative learners.

Play-based programs are not entirely as they sound, just free play. A well-planned play based program incorporates the interests of the children, academic goals and provides learning opportunities through play. Thematic units provide opportunities for children to explore and expand on concepts well beyond a work sheet. A unit on animals in the winter may lead to children pretending to hibernate, building dens and storing “food” for the winter. Counting the nuts they are storing teaches math skills. Engineering concepts are explored through the construction of dens, science skills are developed as they learn which animals hibernate and teamwork and social skills are developed as children work together.

Play is still the work of children in 2013, just as much as it was in Maria Montessori’s time. As parents and early childhood educators seek to enhance children’s academic performance, it is critical that play remains a key component of young children’s experiences.

Parents can learn more about how to select quality early childhood programs and about what play-based education looks like in action at the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) website. Colorado University’s Extension program offers tips on playing with your child and how to support their learning through play in their article [“Learning Through Play - A Child’s Job.”](#) The web and social media tools such as Pinterest offer a wealth of fun ideas to extend your child’s play at home and beyond! Try searching for a topic your child is interested in, or for terms such as “play based learning.”

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