

# Learning to Play Again

## A Constructivist Workshop for Adults



remember now how children love to play. I look around and see math and science things disguised as wire, wood and foam, bamboo, colored plastic rings, cardboard tubes, fabric, yarn, and many other things. Let me get my hands on them so I can play and learn and remember the child inside of me.

— W.F.Drew

**CONSTRUCTIVE, EXPLORATORY, AND DRAMATIC PLAY** is at the heart of early childhood education. Play experiences are key to children forming early understandings about the natural world, mathematical and early literacy ideas, and social competence. Yet in many early care and education programs and throughout our society, play is overlooked and undervalued.

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Photos courtesy of the authors.

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When replicated for adults, hands-on play and reflection experiences lead to insight into children's learning and the teaching process. In the same way that children engage in the reverie of play, adults can rediscover the joy and importance of their own play and creativity.

This "how to" article is a practical guide for conducting a dynamic hands-on adult play workshop. When provided with a carefully structured setting, open-ended materials, and a sensitive play coach, teachers—and parents—can refocus and rethink the role of play. The process often alters insight and changes approaches to the education of young children. The workshops apply constructivist principles to create a learning community in which adults build their own knowledge through hands-on play, reflection on their play experiences, and collaboration with peers.

This approach to teaching and learning is built on several guiding assumptions:

- Every child and adult has a developmental need to experience creativity and self-expression. Play with concrete open-ended materials offers a powerful medium.
- Children and adults who are skilled at play with both things and ideas have more power, influence, and capacity to create meaningful lives. Play can build capacities like problem solving, persistence, and collaboration that we draw on throughout our lives.

## Sample Outline for a Six-Hour Play Workshop

**8:30 A.M. Refreshments**

**9:00 A.M. Welcome**

**9:30 A.M. Introduction.** Coach says a few words about play, the improvement of teaching and learning, the construction of knowledge, creative expression, and the first play activity.

**9:45 A.M. Solitary Play, Sharing in Pairs, and Walk-About, Talk-About.** Participants reflect on their play and describe in some detail what they did; they look for connections between the construction of the outer pattern or design and inner knowledge and the curriculum.



### Short Break

**10:45 A.M. Large Group.** Discuss what happened. What is the value of this experience for the player? What are the implications for our work with children? What is the potential value for teachers and parents? For administrators? Any evidence of mathematical thinking, language development, or science concepts?

### Drawing or Journal Entry

**12:00 P.M. Lunch**

**12:45 P.M. Cooperative Play and Follow-Up.** Small groups work with chosen materials and then discuss their creations. What value is this collaborative process in terms of moral development? What behaviors detract from the collaborative process? Can you identify any behaviors on your own part that you observed? Can you imagine a different way of collaborating? What implications do you see for the classroom?

**1:45 P.M. Large Group Processing.** Participants discuss what they have learned about individual play and collaboration and compare experiences as an individual player and as a co-creator. Can you distinguish differences in how you operate and function? How can collaborative play be useful in your program? What have you observed about the value of open-ended materials?

**2:15 P.M. Discussion: The Learning Experience—Observing, Reflecting, and Documenting.** What are the essential elements of the play experience? What is the role of the teacher in the process of reflecting and documenting?

**2:45 P.M. Meditation Walk and/or Journal Entry.** In what way does this play contribute to building community? Reflecting on the content of your play: What meaning does it have for you?

**3:15 P.M. Closing Comments and Questions.** A look at some action steps we can take together.

- Play is a powerful mode of response to new experiences where the content and meaning are ambiguous and the outcome uncertain. A playful attitude enables the mind to remain open to explore and imagine a wider range of possibilities when seeking answers to new experiences. Play can and should be taught to children, teachers, and parents alike through direct experience. Teaching play requires setting the stage for learning by creating a safe accepting environment for hands-on activities, reflection, and dialogue—as well as for investigating theory and practice.

- Play is an integral part of the curriculum, opening the door to more engaging hands-on problem solving and inspiring projects. It is a natural organizing framework for integrating academic learning experiences in mathematics, science, literacy, and social studies.

- As children and adults play and work together, we can discuss differences of opinion and seek civilized ways of settling them. As we share emotions and thoughts, we gain insight into perspectives other than ours and discover that we are not so different from peers. This process helps us learn how to become positive and contributing members of the community.

### A player's perspective

Imagine you have signed up for a play workshop. Soft piano music plays in the background as you and other participants enter the room. There are no chairs or tables, but distinct sets of various materials are on the floor—skeins of yarn, one-inch cardboard squares, and heaps of blue rectangles, green circles, and yellow cylinders of foam, and so on. No scissors, staplers, or glue are in sight.



“Find a set of materials that appeals to you and a comfortable place to play on the floor,” says the play coach. “Go with the flow, placing, arranging, stacking. Let the kinesthetic interaction move your mind into a focused state of relaxation and creative contemplation. There is nothing in particular you need to do with the materials—there is no product or goal. For the next 20 minutes or so, just relax and explore. During this time, please don’t talk; just be with yourself. Also, instead of sharing, just use the materials you have chosen.”

After your play experience you and a colleague take turns describing your play. The facilitator asks if anyone wants to tell the whole group about the experience. People take turns describing their constructions. You walk around the room with the others, viewing what they have made. Each construction, like each play experience, is different.

One player admits, “Well, at first I was inhibited—you know, it’s like, I don’t have any glue or scissors, so I can’t do anything. But then I relaxed and got into just playing with the pieces.”

With the excitement of a four-year-old, another says, “Hey! Look at me! I’m an architect! No, maybe an engineer—well, certainly a builder. I built a bridge across the pond, and now I can go fishing anytime I want. It was hard work constructing that bridge. I had to carefully measure, compare, sort, and then place materials alongside and on top of one another so my structure would be safe and strong.”

A teacher who chose plastic caps as her medium says, “I experienced the same problem-solving skills

**“Oh, my goodness, THIS IS WHAT IT’S LIKE FOR KIDS! . . .**

**This type of training process is essential for people who have gotten out of touch, who have forgotten who they really are and what they really value.”**



that I've been teaching children for years. I was so aware of the sequencing, patterning, and problem solving that I was doing; it was like having a bell go off in my head. I knew I had to share this experience with other teachers that I know."

"Oh, my goodness," says another player, "this is what it's like for kids! I see the need for this play as part of the whole training process. This for me fits the schema of what I want my staff to experience. I want them to experience the value of play and create a personal vision for themselves based on direct experience. This type of training process is essential for people who have gotten out of touch, who have forgotten who they really are and what they really value."

Repeatedly you hear colleagues talk about focus, control, imagination, and self-expression through objects and open-ended materials. The construction of knowledge through direct experience, reflection, and social interaction takes on new meaning. Discussing your actions, thoughts, and feelings allows you to review the sensory experience, focusing first on the play materials and then gradually connecting with earlier life experiences or thoughts about the world. You make important connections between this experience and what you have read about constructivist learning.

If we have convinced you that a play workshop is worth trying with a group of teachers or parents, you can use the following guidance to prepare. Workshop events are a series of experiences that build on each other, each contributing to the growth of new understandings about teaching and learning. A workshop can be a half-a-day or full-day experience; see boxes on pages 2 and 7 for sample outlines of each.

### **The role of the coach**

The key to successful play experiences is the coach, the person who facilitates each player's process of connecting with imagination and



## **Acquiring Recycled Materials**

For information on Reusable Resource Centers near you or for training and technical assistance in developing a reuse program in your community, contact Reusable Resource Association, P.O. Box 511001, Melbourne Beach, FL 32951, or visit [www.sltrc.com](http://www.sltrc.com).



self-expression. He or she trusts the players to make the most of their play experiences and to bring insight to their reflections.

The coach sets the stage by creating an environment in which people feel safe and accepted. The room should be wide open, empty, well lit, and preferably carpeted. Each person needs enough space to spread out and make expanding patterns or large structures without being crowded by neighbors. Soft background music enhances the mood. Participants can relax and focus their attention easily and engage in conversation without fear of being evaluated and judged.

The coach selects a wide variety of open-ended manipulative resources that discourage competition and comparison. Recycled materials are perfect; businesses everywhere throw away potentially fabulous play materials. Clay, paint, blocks, and sand also can be used, as can nifty finds in thrift shops and yard sales. Each set of materials must be abundant, permitting repetition and elaboration of physical patterns, the development of systems, and the continued flow of an idea or pattern over and over again. There also should be more sets than there are participants.

On the floor throughout the room, the coach arranges the materials in attractive sets, making them easy to distinguish, select, focus on, and use in creative constructive play. No interruptions such as telephones, loud noises, people talking, or other distractions that disturb play and contemplation are permitted.

During the workshop the coach maintains a balance between setting

**"I really feel that it has helped our teachers understand the children, the environment, and children's play. I CAN REALLY SEE IT. I can see it when the teachers play with the children, when they talk to them, when they are setting up the environment, when they are figuring out what materials they want to bring to the classroom."**

limits, observing, listening, and engaging in interactions that communicate acceptance and validate the participants' contributions. Rules such as not talking and no sharing of materials contribute to the feeling of safety needed by players to connect with their inner creativity. Sound, motion, judgment, criticism, and competition all have the power to counter the productive focus of play. The intent is to ensure a concrete, creative, and enjoyable experience and then to encourage reflection by inviting participants to talk about their experiences.

Some initial uncertainty, disorientation, and settling down can be expected. The coach knows that participants will settle in and become purposefully engaged. There is inevitably a moment in the play when things come together.

Through observation and reflection a coach becomes sensitive to the style and pace of effective interactions—when to ask questions, what ones to ask, what action might best guide a player's progress, what comment or question might lead to new insight.

## **Forms of play**

Like young children, the adults in a play workshop progress from solitary and parallel play to cooperative play. Coaches facilitate this process in the following ways.

### **Solitary (solo) play**

- Introduce all participants, then say a few words about the concept of play and the workshop schedule. Let players know there is no hidden agenda nor any expected outcomes.

- Ask participants to choose and play with one set of materials, to just fiddle and follow an inspiration or insight. Ask them not to talk during the solitary play experience, which lasts for approximately 20 minutes.

- Give a five-minute warning so participants can finish what they are doing. If anyone wants to continue exploring beyond the allotted time, let him do so.

- Ask participants to each buddy up with someone and take three to five minutes to tell one another about their play experiences. Explain that one person should speak while the other listens; then they can reverse roles. The speaker will have maximum opportunity to express thoughts, feelings, and experiences—to hear herself think out loud—and relate the content of the play experience spontaneously.

- One option is to ask participants to each create a journal, a visual or written representation of his work as a part of the reflection process. "Draw a picture of what you made. What did you see? What happened?" Players

can draw one part of the pattern or the entire structure, either accurately or abstractly. Encourage players to simply describe what they did.

"Watch what happens as you think and review your play experiences. Go with the flow."

- Invite willing participants to share their play experiences with the

larger group by describing what they did and what happened to them. As they refer back to their concrete play, note their discoveries of relationships between the physical patterns they create and their personal lives. Encourage them to become increasingly aware of the power of play and the diversity of human style and expression. Prompt comments by asking open-ended questions like "Is there anything you would like to share about your play experience?" Follow-up comments like "You balanced the blocks carefully" or "Could you tell me about your choice of colors?" can draw out more information.



- Lead participants in a Walk-About, Talk-About activity so they can see and discuss the various creations in the room.
- Lead a group discussion about the relationships between participants' play experiences and their work with children and other adults. To get started, ask questions such as

What have you learned from this experience?

What assumptions can we make about play?

What is the relationship between your play experience and children's development in the physical, emotional, cognitive, and social realms?

What are the implications of using this experience with children and other adults—parents, teachers?

What is the teacher's role in facilitating rich play experiences for children?

How might this experience influence play in your classroom?

Do you have thoughts on the reflective process with children?

- Comment on players' references and inferences; invite them to discuss implications and consider strategies for improving and using the art of play.



### Cooperative play

- Have participants form small groups, select a variety of materials, and work together to build a common structure.
- Allow time for reflecting within the small groups. Each member should have an opportunity to share thoughts and feelings, all of which are accepted as valid personal accounts.

- Lead the Walk-About, Talk-About, modeling how to be sensitive to each group member. Allow everyone to talk about the experience from his or her perspective—what each did, how it felt, what everyone learned, what insights or difficulties arose.

- Encourage sharing in the full group so players can discuss what they learned. Pose questions about the distinction between parallel and cooperative play, the qualities of effective team behavior, diversity in the team process, and individual participation in teamwork/play. Note that insights gained through sharing and contrasting individual play and cooperative play experiences lead team members to work more effectively together.

- Summarize by helping players think about the relevance of the workshop to their work with children.

Coaches find that play workshops exert a profound effect on participants. Teachers often modify their classrooms after play experiences, looking for new materials and ways to display them. They develop new appreciation for open-ended materials and want to provide children with a greater quantity and variety. They scrounge through their closets for old stashes of stuff that becomes new play material. They also scour school and community based recycling/reuse programs, thrift shops, and tag sales.

Beth, an early childhood special education teacher in Brevard County, Florida, was inspired after a play workshop three years ago. "I gathered a variety of materials from our local resource center—squishy foam, odd-shaped plastic pieces, flexible colored tubes, felt circles, metallic gaskets, and other discarded items donated by businesses. My goal was to inspire investigation, creative thinking, and the

## Suggested Workshop Music

Crystal Voices, *Sounds of Light*

Incantation, *Remembrance*

Keith Jarrett, *The Melody at Night, With You*

Michael Jones, *Magical Child, Piano Scapes, and Air Born*

Gary Lamb, *A Walk in the Garden, Angel, The Language of Love, Watching the Night Fall, Twelve Promises*

Various artists, *Celtic Twilight, Vol. 3: Lullabies*

Various artists, *Raga Taranga*

George Winston, *Autumn, Summer, Winter into Spring*



development of inventive language skills. . . . I simply said [to the children]: ‘Here are some materials that I know you have never seen before. Play with them, move them around and explore them and see what you discover!’”

Beth described how she “observed and photographed the children and scribed their comments as they worked in small groups investigating, comparing, and talking about the different attributes or properties of materials.” She says that they worked together to create categories and systems for organizing and refining their higher-order thinking skills. She says, for example, “I placed long, colored shoelaces on the floor beside them as ‘sorting loops’ to help them physically group the objects. It became a game and a way for me to informally assess their thinking and the language they constructed. After a while I asked, ‘What have you discovered?’”

“The children responded, ‘These are different colors, but they both roll.’ ‘One of these is soft and one is hard, but they are both white.’ I asked if they could find a way to represent or show how the

objects can be part of both sets by overlapping the sorting loops. ‘Is there another way to group them?’ The children discovered that some of the materials can be part of two or more sets. They had fun learning through play how to observe and compare, describe and classify.”

“This hands-on integrated approach to mathematics and science using concrete objects really helps children develop organizing and classification skills.”

### **Connecting play to science, math, and literacy learning**

The growing emphasis on standards and outcomes in early childhood education is pushing us to pay closer attention to academic subjects. What is appropriate for young children? How can content be taught in a manner that respects what we know about early development and the importance of play in the learning process?

At the Education Development Center in Newton, Massachusetts, a project funded by the National

## **Sample Outline for a Half-Day Play Workshop**

### **9:00 A.M. Welcome and Brief Introduction**

**9:30 A.M. Silent Solo Play with One Chosen Material.** As participants play, the coach moves quietly about the room observing, careful not to disturb the play.

**10:00 A.M. Reflection through Writing and/or Drawing.** Participants describe the material used, what they did with it, and what happened.

**10:15 A.M. Sharing One-on-One.** Players take turns sharing play experiences with a partner who listens carefully.

**10:30 A.M. Walk-About, Talk-About.** A brief informal viewing of structures is followed by large group debriefing. Coach responds to participants’ comments and questions about their play.

**11:00 A.M. Cooperative Play.** Coach observes and facilitates play in small groups.

**11:30 A.M. Journal/Drawing Reflection.** Participants describe materials, what they did, and what happened.

**11:45 A.M. Large Group Sharing.** Players and coach discuss what happened and what is needed to apply this practice in classrooms, staff development workshops, and family-education programs.

**12:15 P.M. Reflection and Journaling**

**12:30 P.M. Closing Comments**





Science Foundation has been tackling this question on the science front for four years. The work, soon to be published by Redleaf Press and Heinemann, is built on the premise that development of reasoned theories for why and how things happen in the world is an important part of a quality early childhood education. The project's approach to science teaching begins with a rich set of experiences with materials and phenomena, but also includes many and varied opportunities for children's reflection on those experiences. Children are guided to draw data from their experiences and to use this as evidence as they form reasoned theories about how and why particular phenomena occur.

For example, we know that experiences with construction—with blocks and other manipulatives—provide an experiential base for children to build scientific understanding. But young children are capable of much more than experiencing the forces of gravity while building; they are also capable of forming theories about how and why their buildings are staying up or falling down. Why does foam work as a foundation on Juan's building but not on Janet's? What will happen if the green block is removed from George and Janelle's bridge? What is the best kind of material for a roof, and why?

As a Boston kindergarten teacher explains, "Sure, I asked, 'Tell me about your castle. Who lives there?' . . . but I never went further. Now I always



**P**arent participants look on their children's play with new appreciation and re-evaluate their own roles in **STIMULATING PLAY IN THE HOME**. They begin to question the amount of television viewing they allow and the kinds of toys they provide. One parent returned home from a workshop and cleaned out her children's closets, throwing away toys that did not encourage creative expression.

ask, 'How come that is standing, and this one keeps falling over?' or 'How come your structure fell down when you put that block on top? What do you think would happen if . . . ?' It's not like you need special materials; rather, it's a way of asking questions and observing kids and really furthering their thinking."

Math and literacy can be integrated into play experiences, especially in extended explorations and projects. Key to the inquiry process is recording data and using math processes regularly to describe and document observations like the measurement of buildings. Throughout, language plays an important role and has a powerful connection to conceptual learning.

After Pat, an elementary teacher, took a play workshop, she applied her new insights to her classroom curriculum. The children were interested in space exploration, so she gathered reusable resources (foam, wood, bottles, plastic bags, bamboo, cosmetic caps, cardboard) for the construction of a space station. In each of four groups of six children, science, mathematics, and literacy merged into a sophisticated cognitive process. Learning moved from cooperative three-dimensional construction to sharing and debriefing conversations and journaling and drawing.

Ryan's drawings and labels expressed his insight and excitement. "We had an energy transporter, space probe launcher, escape pod, training camps, intergalactic positioning system, information center, living quarters, space lab, landing platform, and power storage! It is meant to live in and study space."

## Conclusion

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The format of a play workshop mirrors the way children learn about the world—that is, by constructing knowledge from experience. The physical models or structures are catalysts; they organize and focus the mind on elements that are concrete. Richness and clarity come from connecting visual forms of play with reflective dialogue.

Adult play workshops are invaluable professional development tools. They provide opportunities to

- **explore the role of the teacher in the learning process.** Participants practice new ways of implementing a learner-centered approach to teaching and strategies for expanding on the interests and ideas that emerge from the constructive, exploratory, and dramatic play of children.
- **gain insight into the role reflection plays in children's learning.** Participants engage in guided discussion, share their experience with colleagues and relate them to the teaching and learning process. As they step back and examine the process, they gain a deeper understanding of the role these processes can play in children's development and learning.
- **develop a reflective teaching practice.** Coaching and questioning stimulate reflective thinking and deepen analytical skills, preparing teachers for using this kind of reflection as a consistent part of their assessment and planning process.
- **construct, implement, and evaluate new approaches to teaching.** Participants play and work together in collaborative teams, developing new collegial relationships, powerful new teaching

strategies, and insight into the role of documentation in assessment and planning.

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