

PLAY-BASED PHILOSOPHY

In the animal world, play is crucial to learning skills for survival with young and adolescent animals, which in turn means it is crucial to the survival of the species. Lion cubs stalk and pounce on grasshoppers, as well as their siblings, to practice and refine their hunting skills. Baby monkeys chase each other through the trees under the watchful eyes of their mothers, further developing their swiftness and sharpening their sense of awareness. Play in humans is that much more developed and complicated. Social beings such as primates and humans need to play in order to learn social signals and rules that apply to their community and peers. **Children who are deprived of adequate amounts of play struggle socially, cognitively, emotionally and physically.** Countless studies have been done on the importance of play and its role in our development. People who grow-up in stressed, play-free environments are more likely to exhibit anti-social behavior, do poorly in school and in society than people who grow up in an environment where play is an intricate part of their daily lives. Play teaches and reinforces critical and creative thinking, skills that are necessary for academic success.

The key components to the play-based philosophy are

- 1) A rich sensory environment
- 2) Freedom to explore with few restrictions and the time to do it!
- 3) Teachers acting as consultants, supplying materials, initiating conversations, questioning, listening, documenting, encouraging (What next? What else could you try? What do you need?)

Children, as well as adults, need to interact with their world. They need to use their senses to learn. Learning is active, visual, smelly, hands-on, spatial, and downright fun if approached in the right way. Preschool sets the groundwork for our feelings about school. When a young child thinks about school, it should invoke a sense of excitement, anticipation and motivation. As educators our job is to grab onto that motivation and keep the wonder in learning. Yes, there should be a structure to the day; group time, project time, lunchtime, reading time, but this structure should not interfere with the necessary time a child needs to explore their world. The classroom should be set-up in order to engage every student and their individual learning styles. Children should be allowed to have "too much" paint or glue or glitter or clay or mud. What they are experiencing should be real, and relevant to the child. If it hasn't been in the hand and body, it can't be in the brain. As teachers it would be easier to sit with a group of children, reciting letter/sound relationships, counting colored bears, and writing letters and numbers on lined paper. Our challenge is to offer learning experiences that are richer and focus on participation not performance, process not product. Isn't it more fun to learn about the power of the written word by playing restaurant and designing menus, writing lunch orders, and painting signs? Doesn't it make sense to learn math concepts by using a sensory table filled with water, sand, measuring cups, colanders, spoons and spatulas? During play, children learn how to compromise, take turns, share, negotiate, problem-solve and think critically and creatively, all of which are essential academic skills. We support literacy in our environment by reading books and having books available to the children, and by supplying a variety of drawing and writing materials daily. As teachers we facilitate the reading and writing process through

dictation, story writing and telling, drawing, book-making, singing, make-believe and rhyming games. We use a whole-language approach which allows the child to explore the written word through environmental print and hands-on experience with materials in their world.

In conclusion, the JCC Preschool is committed to the play-based philosophy and all that it offers our young children. As a society we continue to over-schedule our children and put them under incredible amounts of stress to perform in school. Children are born motivated to learn and we as adults need to allow our children the time to play, explore, and wonder. There is a wonderful website www.turnthepage.com which is very informative on the play-based philosophy and features some interesting articles on the importance of play.

- Susie Valdez

"Children know what they need to do." - Bev Bos, play-based educator and author

"When your time comes and your whole life flashes before you -- will it hold your interest?" - Stuart L. Brown, M. D.

"Too much information can swamp the boat of wonder." - Chet Raymo

"Play is coming to terms with the unknown." - Plato

"If it hasn't been in the hand, it can't be in the brain." - Bev Bos