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FINAL REPORT

Giving Children Back Their Right to Playfully Learn: How After-School Programs Can Play an Important Role

“We are intrinsically motivated to learn.” This statement has been the foundation of my instructional practices since coming to work in a public Montessori school. As Montessori educators, we strive to create an environment that stimulates the child’s mind while supporting and following his or her passions. We believe that children are innately wired to learn and that when given the freedom to explore their interests, they will. I question whether or not I would have adopted this doctrine had I not spent many years working in after-school programs. Over the 10 years prior to becoming a Montessori teacher I worked at an inner-city after-school program for children ages 3 to 11 years. I taught various classes ranging from homework help to science to theater. As much as I enjoyed planning and implementing extra-curricular lessons, I also realized how much these children needed to play. The energy I needed to insurge my lessons with to keep my students motivated and activated was at times exhausting and did not feel sustainable. However, when I allowed the children to guide the learning and experience the children would leave the class excited and happy. During these moments of unplanned play, I saw children collaborating and creating in a variety of ways. These moments impacted me and my beliefs about learning and child development. I no longer thought that education was something that I need to thrust upon my students but rather an experience that can be supported in variety of capacities.

After-school programs, in my belief, offer a new frontier for progressive educational experiences for children. For the past 30 years, formal education has moved away from progression and towards oppression. Exploritative learning experiences hardly exist in traditional classrooms as the focus in education has become centered on standardizing the content of what children learn and the practices that teachers use. As policymakers focus their attention on “education reform” in an effort to close the achievement gap and raise test scores, after-school programs are left with an important decision to make. These centers, which offer care for over 6.5 million children a year (Fiester, 2004), are finding themselves at a new crossroad. They can either allow education reform to trickle-down and re-create themselves as extended learning time zones or they can provide a space to give children what many are missing in their daily lives: play. Too many children are losing this critical component of their development. After-school programs have the chance to give this developmental right back to children. They just need to be educated as to how and why.

This report is intended to be used as a resource for after-school programs and educators to better understand the positive developmental impact of unstructured play and how to create spaces within after-school that can promote these kinds of experiences. This resource, which is focused on play and after-school programs, is two-faceted. The first facet of this report is provide a developmental rationale for the importance of play. From this rationale, this first segment of the report then tries to put into context why children in today’s society need physical spaces like after-school programs to play freely. This contextual basis leads into the second facet of the report. The second facet is a vision plan as to how to structure unstructured after-school programs. This portion of the report provides a breakdown of the various components that a

potential program of this model should consider, such as how to properly set up a space that invites explorative play and the training of staff. It offers a realistic vision of what this report is trying to accomplish, the use of after-school programs as spaces for choice-based, child-initiated risky-play.

PART I

Why Does Play Matter?

Play is not just some action that those whom are more fortunate and privileged are able to partake in but rather it is a biological condition that all humans (and most mammals) have within themselves and can access whenever motivated. Play is a Darwinian tool, one that has caused great strides for the development of mammals, especially humans. Many species of mammals use play as means to communicate to their next generations vital skills that will aid in their survival. The innate desire to play is linked to the evolution and development of humans.

When observing animals, specifically mammals, one can observe a playful interaction either between an animal and a toy or another animal. Dogs, the animal most emotionally-connected to humans, is an easy example to give. Any dog-owner can explain the physiological and psychological differences between their dog in a state of play and a state of defense. At a dog park owners will watch their dogs attack one another because, based on the dogs' body gestures, they know it is just play. The question this raises for evolutionary theorists is why would animals play if it were not something immediately related to their survival, thus asking what is the evolutionary role of play.

Dr. Peter Gray in his book, Free to Learn discusses the work of Karl Groos, a German naturalist and philosopher. Groos took Charles Darwin's writings and applied modern thinking

of instincts to Darwin's work. His thought was that mammals, like all other animals, come into the world with biological drives and instinctual behaviors but must also learn how to accurately apply these instincts. He saw play as the method in which animals fine-tune these instincts.

Groos's argument was that play is not an action done because of youthfulness but rather childhood is a time where young can develop essential skills through one's own experience. In Gray's book, Gray goes on to explain that Groos's theory helps to demonstrate why younger animals often play more with older animals so that they can learn from these playfully wiser peers. He also states that the level of play an animal engages in correlates to the amount that an animal must learn and the flexibility of that animal's instincts. Gray uses the example of primates to show that these animals have the most to learn and are observably the most playful of animals (Gray, 2013). For Gordan Burghardt, his research on social behavior in relation to Groos's work states that for animals whose ecological surroundings are "unstable and varied," meaning their livelihood is under constant threat and reconditioning, the play of a species's young can be an important mechanism for them to explore and experiment within their ecological niche in order to survive (Pellegrini, Dupuis, & Smith, 2007, 262).

As arguably the most evolved species on Earth, human young have a lot to learn, as well as a multitude of ways in which they play to develop these essential and important skills. This means that the type of play a child engages in relates to a particular skill's development. In his book, Gray classifies the various forms of play in which children engage in with explanations as to the skills each type of play helps children develop. Below is a list Gray's (2013) categorization of each type and a summary of their impact on human skill development.

- **Physical play:** *How children develop strong bodies and move in coordinated ways*

Games that require running, chasing, rough-and-tumbling, all develop the child's physical body and build muscle strength. Physical play can vary depending on the cultural norms but all children have games that develop their physical bodies in order to help them grow into healthy adults.

- **Language play:** *How children learn to talk and communicate*

Beginning as infants, children experiment and play with sounds in order to mimic and interact with others. As children get older they continue to play with language, finding new ways to communicate ideas.

- **Exploratory play:** *How children learn to discover and push the status quo*

Rather than a type of play, this is more of a *way* of playing. Most of children's play uses exploration. The explorative element in play is how children learn to make new discoveries. By learning how something works or trying new methods, children (and adults) learn to push the human condition forward.

- **Constructive play:** *How children learn to build and create*

Constructive play is not just literal building. In this type of play children master how to creatively put objects, words, sounds, or chemicals together. This type of play develops the intellectual and practical mind.

- **Fantasy play:** *How children learn to plan for the future and develop logically sequential thought*

As children engage in such fictional play they suspend their literal and immediate minds to activate creative thought and to think about things that are not immediately present.

This type of play builds children's critical and logical thinking processes.

- **Social play:** *How children learn to cooperate and behave in socially acceptable ways*

When children engage in play with others they are immediately developing their social competencies. They have to behave in ways that others deem acceptable as well as practice their skills in negotiation. For instance, if one child wants to be a certain character in their make-believe play and the other child does not, in order for the play to continue, the two children have to find a common ground. This practice in negotiation will be essential to their lives as adults.

How Children Are Spending Their Time Out of School

Now more than ever human children are not getting as much time to naturally develop these skills through play. Based on a research conducted back in 1997, Peter Gray, Ph.D found that children were only spending an average of 11 hours a week in true play, a major decline from 10 years prior (Entin, 2011). The question this raises is what are children doing with the remaining hours? According to the research done by the Kaiser Family Foundation, children between the ages of 8 to 18 are spending almost 11 hours a day exposed to media, with over 4 hours spent watching television (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010). As educators and parents we have to ask ourselves what impact are these media-consumed “play” experiences having on children? And, what can this mean for after-school programming?

Based on the research of Tiffini Chin and Meredith Philips, it was discovered that a large percentage of children are spending their time in what they define as “absorbing play,” allowing their entertainment to come from exterior sources like television and are passively allowing it to cognitively consume them. Based on Chin & Philips’s research, they discovered that the more children interacted with peers on challenging self-initiated tasks the greater the increase in

cognitive attentiveness (Chin & Phillips, 2003). Their research demonstrates a need for children to be able to interact with peers in a constructive and independent fashion.

Dr. Peter Gray feels similarly. Gray is one of the major researchers and writers of children and play, and in an interview with him, Gray spoke about the developmental need for free play. His point, however, was more directly targeted on the need for spaces where children can play without interruption from adults. He shared that when given the opportunity to play freely with other children, children will create rules and manage the play, thus developing their essential human skills more than they otherwise would. Gray explained that children are less likely to take ownership of their play and interactions if they perceive an adult is creating limitations. Children will happily explore, create, and play more if they know the play belongs to them rather than the adults (Gray, personal communication, November 6, 2015).

So, how are after-schools relevant to all this? Because of the changes in today's society, it is rare for children to roam freely about their neighborhoods nor is it considered safe as it once was. Findings from the Child Development Project found that when children were left to self-care after school these children had poor academic achievement (Vandell & Shumow, 1999). The hours after school seem to be even more important for children from low-income families and neighborhoods. The Boston After-School Time Project found that low-income children were more likely to have aggressive behaviors, acts of defiance, and hyperactivity (Vandell & Shumow, 1999). It is clear that children need to be supervised in some capacity after school but also need spaces to play independently. After-school programs have an opportunity to meet these needs.

The Relevance and Importance of Child-Initiated and Choice-Based Risky-Play

What would these free after-school play centers look like? The way for children to reach their developmental goals with feelings of autonomy and resiliency would require their play be child-initiated and choice-based with an emphasis on what I refer to as risky-play. Risky-play is the type of play where children work with real tools and materials in an effort to push themselves to discover their limits physiologically and creatively. When children operate under the conditions that adults impose, children do not learn to make meaning of the world for themselves or to think critically about their own skills. However, risky-play, such as hammering various items together, building fires, and walking on stilts pushes children to new dimensions of their critical and creative thinking. Erin Davis, documentary filmmaker of the film *The Land* (a movie about the U.K.'s adventure playgrounds designed with the intent to invite risky-play for purposes of child development), describes that children need spaces where they feel empowered to manage risks. In her interview with NPR, Davis shared that she has found that across time children and their play-related desires have been the same. Children have always wanted to climb, hide, and create their own worlds; the only difference, she shared, is that now children have less opportunity to (Westervelt, 2015).

Educators and caregivers could give children hammers and saws in organized settings, but part of the experience for the children would be lost. Risky-play does not hold benefit for children unless it is child-initiated. Choice-based and child-initiated play are types of play where children use their internal motivations to make decisions as to what they want to do or learn. Intrinsic motivation, as to opposed to extrinsic motivation, is the desire to do something simply because it interests the person doing the action (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The autonomy that comes from allowing one to follow his or her intrinsic desires helps establish an ownership of one's

learning and experiences. When children are given such opportunities they build positive feelings of power and freedom associated to their learning (Erwin, 2003).

Below is a vision plan for how to create choice-based, child-initiated risky-play after-school spaces.

PART II

A Vision for After-School Programs

As more families need after-school care and parents feel less secure allowing their children to safely explore their neighborhoods, after-school programs have a unique opportunity to provide spaces for children to re-establish play into their daily routines and regain this development right. Below is a breakdown of how after-schools can “structure” themselves and their programs in a way that promotes choice-based and child-initiated risky-play.

The Physical Space

When beginning to design or implement this form of programming, program directors and teachers need to think critically about the space in which their programs are going to operate in. Those facilitating the program have to take in account for the amount of indoor and outdoor space and how and where to display materials. Due to health code and EEC (Early Education and Care) regulations, directors need to design their spaces accordingly, being mindful of what they are allowed to do within their spaces while also try to outfit them in a way that promotes exploratory play for children. The three elements that programs trying to create choice-based, child-initiated risky-play spaces should be cognizant of are the kinds of materials

children will interact with and use, the way in which materials are displayed and intermixed, and how these spaces will be maintained.

Taking into account the types of play children do, programs should provide materials that will support the variety play that children partake in. Children will need materials that they can use for dress up, for table games, and for creation. A large quantity of the materials should be ones that children can create and build with. Rather than supplying the children with pre-purchased or new supplies, most of the materials can be a collection of recycled objects, potentially items children have found. Programs should try to provide real or natural materials, like wood and metal. These materials will support deeper discovery and critical thinking as student play with them. To support children's building, they will also need access to tools such as hammers, nails, and saws.

Unlike school where materials are identified and then segregated by subject, all materials should be viewed as tools that can be used collectively for children's exploration and creation. However, it is important for programs and their teachers to be mindful of where they are displaying the materials. To help child locate the items they might need, teacher should organize and categorize the materials in a logical fashion. These materials should be outwardly and openly displayed. Hiding materials from children will only inhibit their work. Children should feel that they can take what they are working on in one area and bring it to another freely. Specific "areas" should be more related to the level of play and group engagement and less about the type of play occurring. With that said, it is important to provide quieter spaces for when children need time to be alone or introverted, but otherwise the spaces should feel like various workspace areas.

The Role of the Adults

In any care-related program, the role in which the adults play within the program is an important one to consider. The way in which a program views and identifies the adults can impact programming and the relationship the adults have with the children. In a program where the adults are considered teachers may operate very differently than in a program where they are seen as caregivers. These roles influence how children perceive the adults and how the adults interact with the children. For the programs that are choice-based, child-initiated risk-play centers, adults are far more removed from the children's moment to moment interactions than in most other sites. The goal is for adults to be sideline supports, people whom are trained to supervise and protect children with minimal interference of the children's free play.

For many child-care programs, it is unusual for the adults to be purposefully removed from the children's interactions, whereas it is usually encouraged for the adults to be actively engaged with them. However, because of the off-centered power dynamics between adults and children and intention of letting children develop their skills at their own pace, the need for minimal adult interference is crucial. The adults in these spaces are not teacher or caregivers, but rather playworkers, a term taken from the UK's adventure playgrounds. Their job is to understand the significance of play, what developmentally appropriate play looks like, and to monitor for overall safety. These playworkers are there to be the children's safety net, but only when truly needed; otherwise, the children are mostly exploring, learning, and playing on their own.

In order for these programs to function effectively and safely, the training and education of these playworkers is essential. Playworkers need to be given child development and play

training. These trainings would be based on the same research that this report is founded on. The trainings should help playworkers be able to identify the various forms of play when they are occurring. Training on play and human development will help playworkers understand the relevance of the work that the children are doing and why it is essential for the playworker to pull back. With that said, these playworkers need to have extensive training on CPR, First Aid, and bullying. Playworkers need to know what bullying looks like and how to intervene when it is happening. And since the children are working with dangerous tools and materials, playworkers need to know how to respond in severe situations. Even though the intention of these spaces is for children to engage in risky-play independently, there still needs to be adults that can care for these children in high-need situations.

Rules and Regulations to Follow

As free from rules and restraints as this model for programming aims for, it does not completely disregard the need for order. Rules are important to the functioning upkeep and safety for the children whom would attend these programs. These programs have EEC and health code regulations to follow. Depending on the place where these programs are, these codes will vary and be addressed individually by each program. However, all programs need to have certain rules in which the playworkers, children, and parents need to follow to ensure that there is some order and understanding as to how to act within the confines of these programs.

In effort to create rules, programs and their playworkers should limit the number of imposed rules from adults. Children have an innate desire and sense of order. They expect each other to follow certain civilized rules. Most children understand that they ought to be treated in a certain way and can rationalize that these wishes they have for themselves can apply to the

desires of others. This sense of order and understanding of others is a strong platform for supporting the creation of child-generated rules. The more the rules are child-initiated and child-generated the greater the buy in the children will have. This buy in from the children is important because the children will take ownership of the rules and enforce them throughout the program.

Not only do the programs need buy in from the children but also from the parents. Since children are going to be allowed to work with dangerous tools and be responsible for the care of each other, it is important for parents to understand how the supervision and role of the playworkers is different than in other programs. Parents need to be educated prior to their children being enrolled and part of the enrollment should be a consent form. The form is to ensure that parents understand why playworkers allow certain actions and behaviors to occur and when playworkers will intervene. This form is to help ensure that there is a clear idea as to what is happening and to avoid legal issues.

Documentation of Success

The final component that programs should address is documentation of success. These forms of documentation could be conveyed through testimonies, child work, or even photographs. Since this form of after-school care is a new concept for many it will be important for prospective parents and possible funders to see the benefits of these programs. The intention of these programs is not to encourage children to be producers of work, but any way that programs can show how these spaces have positively impacted children will help the continuation and expansion of the idea that children need unstructured play and spaces to do so.

Next Step

The project that this report is founded on is a relatively new concept. Few after-school programs are actively creating spaces where children can explore as freely as this model suggests. This project hopes to work with and build off the work of Camp Stomping Ground, a unstructured overnight camp in New York. Collaboration with this camp is to help develop a deeper understanding of accessing potential financial funders and stakeholders in order to help develop this model further. This report also seeks to eventually push this model in inner-city areas where children are in the highest need and use of after-school care but have the fewest opportunities to play freely. The intention of this report is to make these vital elements of play and development available to all and to create spaces where children can honestly regain their right to play.

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