

UAIMH Newsletter

Utah Association for Infant Mental Health

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<http://www.uaimh.org>



President's Corner

What do infants and young children know? How do they know? How do they show us what they understand and how they feel?

In the early Fall of 2010, a photographic artist in Ottawa, Canada, Johnathan Login, presented an exhibit at the Dale Smith Gallery of children's play titled "In the Playroom." The public reaction was a critical outcry against his depiction of children's play, staging serious real-life events that have shaken us all in recent years. The artist's response to the criticism was, "Kids have always taken what they see in life and incorporated it into their play. Play is a tool that kids use to process and understand the world around them." He was quoted further as saying, "I agree that children shouldn't see this stuff, but they are, and I'm trying to start a dialogue about that fact." He went on to say, "There are lots of children out there who experience things that wake them up to the darker sides of life and they become very aware that not everything is going to be all right" (reported by, Michel Comte, Ottawa [AFP], October 10, 2010, "Photographer's violent 'Playroom' shots rile critics").

This immediately brought to mind a story from my own clinical practice. A few days following the September 11, 2001, attacks, I was seeing a 5-year-old boy for a routine follow-up appointment. His mother came into the room ahead of him and whispered to me that she felt sure he did not know anything about what had happened. She quickly and quietly reported to me that the parents had kept their television turned off and had not talked in front of the children at all.

The mother and I sat down on the perimeter of the play area, in the middle of my exam room, as her son began taking toys from the cubicles to play. I started asking

Play is a tool that kids use to process and understand the world around them.

questions to follow up on the medication issues for which they had come. As the mother and I talked, her son quietly gathered all of the 3" inch square blocks and built two tall towers side by side. As he was building, I surreptitiously touched the mother's knee and pointed toward her son for

her to watch. He continued to develop an accurate replica of the 9/11 attacks, getting an airplane out of the cubicle, flying it over, and crashing it into the towers. The two towers of blocks crashed down around the Fischer-Price family home. The police and firemen came. The "dad" got on the front-end loader and began removing the blocks from around the home. The little "boy" went to help his "dad." My patient looked up finally to see if his mother and I had been watching his play. I said, "Oh my! What has happened?" He looked up and told us, in his own words, the story of the 9/11 attacks. Through this window of free play we learned something about his level of exposure and understanding that we had not exactly expected.

Young children know a great deal at their level of awareness and comprehension. They are sentient beings who take in every subtle cue available to them—through their senses of sound, sight, touch, smell, and taste as well as their superb ability to mirror the emotional states of others. Can they express the depth and breadth of this keen understanding? Not in words! How do they show us what they know? Through their play! Do we pay attention to their play, valuing their

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sensitivity, their insight, and their inner experience that is readily available to us? Not well enough!

Reciprocal play is a critical element in early parent-infant attunement and bonding. It is an essential part of the development of emotional expression and regulation, and sets early basic patterns for reciprocal social interaction and language. Independent play—investigation/experience/exploration of the natural world supports cognitive development and problem solving, and stimulates novel individual imaginative thinking, with minimal boundaries or intrusions by others. Play with others supports skills of self-governance and negotiation with others, and creative imaginative thinking and problem solving in a socially dynamic situation. Most important of all are the contributions that play makes to a child's senses

Play provides a buffer for anxiety and depression...

of themselves—mastery, competence, wellbeing, ability to overcome odds, and resilience in the face of life's challenges. Play provides a buffer for anxiety and depression, which is currently increasing in children of all ages.

We have chosen to focus this newsletter on an exploration of the positive developmental aspects of play and how to value its essential place in trajectory of children into healthy adults. What are we to do now?

*Judith Ahrano Kittel, MD, FAAP
Developmental Behavioral Pediatrician
President of UAIMH*

Suggested Readings:

Burdette, H.L., & Whitaker, R.C. (2005). Resurrecting free play in young children: Looking beyond fitness and fatness to attention, affiliation, and affect. *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine*, 159, 46-50.

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Powers, S. (Ed.). (2009). The importance of play. *Zero to Three*, 30(1).

Shonkoff, J.P., & Phillips, D.A. (Eds.). (2000). *From neurons to neighborhoods: The science of early childhood development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

Thompson, R.A. (2001). Development in the first years of life. *Future of Children*, 11(1), 22-33.

Brown, S., & Vaughan, C. (2009). *Play: How it shapes the brain, opens imagination, and invigorates the soul*. New York: NY: Avery.

The End of Playtime?

In the battle against obesity, the Department of Health and Human Services started a campaign to get children to play more (September of 2009, at: <http://multivu.prnewswire.com/mnr/adcouncil/39940>). The slogan at the end is "Did you play today?"

When thinking of the nature of children, it is surprising that this question even needs to be asked. Play is a natural part of childhood in all mammals--including humans! Research abounds showing the positive effects of child-initiated play, including rough-and-tumble play and sociodramatic play. For example, kindergartners who engage in longer and more complex sequences of sociodramatic play are likely to be better liked by their peers (Connolly & Doyle, 1984; Fein, 1981). They also tend to have better language skills, social skills, and self-regulation skills (Ginsburg et al., 2007; Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983). All of these are crucial for later success in life, both socially and academically. Physical, rough-and-tumble play is important, too, especially for boys. Preschool and kindergarten boys who play longer sequences of rough-and-tumble play with their dads, with more smiling and laughter, are more socially competent and popular with their peers

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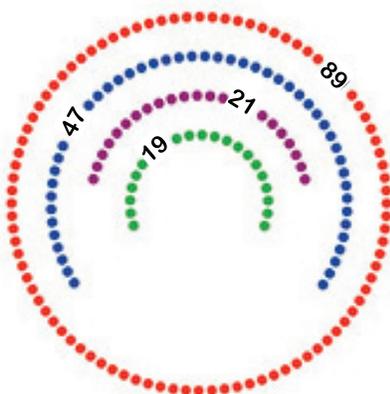
(Barth & Parke, 1993; MacDonald & Parke, 1984).

Recently opportunities for play have been disappearing from children's lives. Since *No Child Left Behind*, schools have been focusing on test scores and cutting back on recess and playtime. This trend is shifting into earlier and earlier ages. For example, the *Alliance for Childhood* cited a study that showed that the majority of full-day kindergartens studied lacked materials for dramatic play, sand and water tables, and even blocks (see <http://www.allianceforchildhood.org>). They also report:

- On a typical day, kindergartners in Los Angeles and New York City spend four to six times as long being instructed and tested in literacy and math (2 to 3 hours per day) as in free play or "choice time" (30 minutes or less).
- Standardized testing and preparation for tests are now a daily activity in most of the kindergartens studied, despite the fact that the use of most such tests with children under age 8 is scientifically invalid and often harmful.
- In many kindergarten classrooms there is no play-time at all. Teachers say the curriculum does not incorporate play, there isn't time for it, and many school administrators do not value it.

A beautiful graph by the Alliance of Childhood makes painfully clear how little time is spent in free play in kindergartens. Sadly, the emphasis on academics over free play has even penetrated preschools. My 4-year-old son attends a university-based preschool that emphasizes play in its mission statement. Although the children

TELLING TIME
Average number of minutes spent daily on literacy, math, test prep and free play in 112 Los Angeles kindergarten classes:



Source: "Crisis in the Kindergarten," Alliance for Childhood, March 2009

do get to play indoors twice during the half-day program, and also go outside every day, the blocks of time allowing free play are only about 30 minutes long—not very much time to encourage extensive play scenarios! Still, many other preschools focus even more on early academics and I am grateful for any acknowledgment of the importance of play for early learning!

What about Babies?

Although I do not know how much time they spend playing, I know that they are watching more TV than recommended (see <http://www.aap.org>). My undergraduate students are always surprised when I tell them the recommended amount of screen time for children under the age of 24 months by the American Academy of Pediatrics, which is none at all! For children aged 2 and over, a maximum of 1 to 2 hours per day are recommended. However, a recent national survey of 1,051 parents of children aged 6 months to 6 years found that the TV is on for 6 hours or more every day in an average U.S. home (Kaiser Foundation, 2005; <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/7500.cfm>). This makes it likely that infants are at least passively exposed to TV. Recent studies have found that background noise in a home, including background TV, reduces the quality and amount of infant solo play and parent-infant interactions (see <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/09/0909151100951.htm>). The Kaiser Foundation also found that 61% of babies under 1 year old watched TV on average for 1:20 hours per day, and that 83% of children under 6 years of age use screen media—much more than recommended.

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Oftentimes, parents have good intentions when putting their littlest ones in front of a screen. Many of them believe it is educational to do so. However, studies have not shown benefits of watching educational TV for children under age 2. Some have even shown negative effects on infants' development! For example, in one survey, 29% of parents believed

(continued...)

that TV was educational or good for the infant brain (Zimmerman, 2007). However, research reports indicate that infants do not tend to learn from DVDs (for example, see a recent report on www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2010/03/100301165612.htm). One study even found that, for every hour of TV watched per day, 2-year-olds knew 6-8 fewer words (Fogel, 2009). A study comparing two methods of teaching infants (nearly 1 year old) Mandarin Chinese found that infants learned to distinguish Mandarin sounds from repeated sessions with a native speaker (who was responsive to the babies). However, they did not learn from watching a similar person on DVD (research by Dr. Patricia Kuhl and her colleagues; see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fcb8nT0QC6o>).

Fewer Opportunities for Play?

It seems that children have fewer opportunities for play these days. Even infants and toddlers may have little time for free exploration due to ever-increasing presence of TV and computers in American homes and to the large proportion of “scheduled” time (e.g., Kindermusik classes, daycare, etc.). Parents are also worried about having their children play outside due to real or perceived dangers; thus, children are less and less able to roam freely, build forts, climb trees, and so forth. This development has even come to a point where one journalist, Richard Louv, has coined the term “Nature Deficit Disorder.” He wrote the book, “*Last Child in the Woods*” about the worrying lack of free roaming in green areas, in which all kinds of play is possible, such as building forts, chasing each other, discovering nature, etc. (see <http://richardlouv.com>). Studies with adults have shown that greenery is restorative for attention and it is likely that the same goes for children as well. We all need to “recharge batteries” every now and then!

So What Can We Do?

Play, as Piaget said, is “the work of childhood.” It is an arena for developing skills in all aspects of their development. More importantly, children enjoy it! They can learn how to be

Play is “the work of childhood.”
(Piaget)

creative, how to cooperate, negotiate, lead, follow, etc., all out of their own volition and direction. So what can we do to encourage this?

1. Let them play! Make sure to schedule plenty of time for play. For infants and young children, it is good to spend time playing with them, but also to let them play on their own. Join in when you have time, and don’t be afraid to act silly! Nursery rhymes may be old-fashioned, but infants still love them! And you can help your older child expand on fantasy play themes or offer alternative ideas that can enhance their play. Not to mention that pretending is a great way to get toddlers and preschoolers to do what you want!

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2. Reduce screen time and watch with your children if you do decide to let them watch.
3. Relax! It’s okay for activities to not have a purpose or an obvious result. Play is characterized by its lack of purpose. But it is precisely that which gives it its power. Because it has no purpose, it can take the young human mind into every place or situation imaginable--thereby enhances its creativity and joy!

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Zimmerman(2007).*Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine*, 161, 473-479. Also see: <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2007/05/070507183624.htm>

Supporting the Attachment Instinct Through Play

On the west side, of somewhere, a lonely and impoverished stricken single mother cries as her infant gazes in her sob-soaked brown eyes. Mother prays about what she is doing with her life and her new infant, an only child and her firstborn son. She had no money, no toys, and no home. Only the diaper on her baby's bottom, a half can of formula, and a dream—a gleam of hope that her son and she would not perish in the night from harm. They had nothing monetary as they entered the shelter doors that rainy, cold, November night. Mother was an educated woman, yet she was completely ignorant in the area of child rearing—or so she thought. The only parenting she knew of was her parents' parenting her. She knew poverty well! Mother was creative and used what she had—her

voice, her body, and imagination, to teach and entertain her precious one. Mother invented a game, “Spider and George.” “Spider” was her right index finger. It spoke English and Spanish. “Spider” was nonsensical. “George” was her whole left hand, in a puppet-like form. “George” had a deeper voice and was a logical thinker. This intimate parent/child play felt very good to both infant and mother. With every smile and laugh mother received, she gained courage and strength to do her best raising her son alone. With every approving reinforcement and met needs baby received, the more secure and strong the infant became—now and later as he grew and matured. No one told mother and son that this imaginative play created intimacy. This was simple instinct, a dance for survival, and pure enjoyment. This dance between mother and son encouraged exploration and confidence in her son and within herself. They were learning and growing together—without toys, without batteries, and without money. Mother found a sense of hope (*hold-on possibilities exist*). Her hope was in the growing attachment—though it was a few years before she learned the name of this phenomenon. Mother and infant were developing a secure attachment through this intimate imaginative play.

Commentary

The infant and mother in this story were just beginning, through reciprocal play, to strengthen their attachment, in a time of great adversity, building on the sensorily based attachment and reciprocity experienced from within the womb. Their “silly” imaginative play with “George and spider” was a way of developing their relationship, furthering the infant's security in his environment and within himself, and supporting the mother's inner confidence for providing ongoing comfort and care to her infant and herself.

When mother used her hand as a puppet, “George” and/or “spider,” both mother and child were exploring and developing their world together. Mother was learning how to meet her baby's needs, using her infant's cues, and her baby was learning to regulate the interaction and was experiencing the sustainability and security of life. Intimate play, between an infant and a mother/caregiver is pleasurable for both. Many opportunities

arise to continue to strengthen attachment security and pleasure within the mother/caretaker-infant/child relationship. Play provides an increasingly secure, protective, sustaining relationship that mutually supports the ability of each partner to weather the difficult times ahead.

Intimate play between the infant/caregiver dyad brings pleasurable feelings for both the infant and the caregiver—creating a safety net for the infant. This process develops and strengthens attunement in both the infant and caregiver. Emotionally, during intimate *en face* play, there is growth of feelings of security and trust that the infant's needs are being and will be met, most of the time, by a consistent, loving adult. The caretaker,

Play provides an increasingly secure, protective, sustaining relationship that mutually supports the ability of each partner to weather the difficult times ahead.

in turn, experiences feeling capable of providing this support. When the infant sees something new, he/she will glance back at the caregiver, nonverbally asking the caregiver to share the experience with the infant and to “label” it. Attunement, this matching of emotion, thought, and experience, contributes

to an increasingly secure attachment. Deepening attachment security gives confidence and joy to a tired, weary caretaker as synchronous attunement strengthens between mother and infant. The caregiver mirrors affect to the infant and names the feeling—teaching the infant ultimately to label his/her own emotions and express them in safe and appropriate ways. Internally, the infant learns to feel joy, sorrow, amusement, sadness, understanding, and anger, and is increasingly able to express a wider range of human emotion. The infant and caregiver bond continues to be strengthened as they are joined by shared feelings.

No caregiver is perfect. We all make mistakes. Even the strongest of relationships have their moments. Below are nine ideas to remember, utilize, and focus on when parenting struggles occur.

Baby Steps to Attachment Security

- Step # 1: Brain craze: studies show that mutual joy between parent/infant encourages increased brain growth.
- Step # 2: Holding on: physically holding an infant provides joy and soothes and organizes the infant's emotions.
- Step # 3: The eyewitness: looking the infant in the eyes allowing the infant to engage and disengage eye contact reassures the infant that the parent is supportive of the infant and that the environment is safe.
- Step # 4: Follow the little leader: allow the infant freedom to lead play.
- Step # 5: Babies don't spoil: responsive parents tend to have less demanding children.
- Step # 6: When it hurts: stay with the child through difficulties.
- Step # 7: Labels: labeling emotions for the infant allows the infant to begin to label their own later in development.
- Step # 8: Oops; parental mistakes happen, be good enough, it is practice, not perfection.
- Step # 9: Stand Tall; Parents are bigger, stronger, and wiser and can protect and nurture their infants.

(Adapted from Cooper, Hoffman, Marvin, & Powell, 2000)

Any activity that involves parent/child interaction can be an avenue for nurturing a secure attachment. When parent/child join together in play, singing, dancing, exploring, and engaging, children's brains change, grow, and develop. Principles to follow in play are: (1) be warm, loving, and responsive; (2) respond to the child's cues and clues; (3) talk, read, and sing to the young child; (4) establish routines and rituals; (5) encourage safe exploration and play; (6) make TV watching selective; (7) use discipline as an opportunity to teach; (8) recognize that each child is unique; (9) choose quality child care and stay involved; and (10) take care of yourself (READY, 1998).

April Ann Hewes, CSW, MSW

Suggested Readings/References

- Bartsch, K., Wright, J.C., & Estes, D. (2010). Young children's persuasion in everyday conversation: Tactics and attunement to others' mental states. *Social Development, 19*(2), 394.
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Book Review

Brown, S., & Vaughan, C. (2009). *Play: How it shapes the brain, opens the imagination and invigorates the soul*. New York NY: Penguin.

As the child enters into more elaborate play with blocks, human and animal figures, parents often step aside, yet these moments present an opportunity to observe the child creating and playing out the days events. During child-directed play the parent may be fortunate to be asked to join in for pretend and expansion of the story. This scene appears on the surface so basic, so simple; however, these are golden moments for child and parent child together.

Play is essential for brain, body, and social/emotional development and just as essential as sleep and good

nutrition. Play develops from a foundation of a trusting relationship with the parent or caring adult and expands and carries through the life span.

In the book, "Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination and Invigorates the Soul," Stuart Brown, M.D., Founder of the National Institute of Play (www.nifplay.org), along with Christopher Vaughan, discuss the complexity and necessity of play for healthy development and living through the life span. The authors provide scientific data along with charming anecdotes about humans and animals in play.

In general, the authors define play as "voluntary and flexible and seemingly purposeless." "Seemingly" is the key word. The authors back the discussion with intriguing research. One such rat study found that rats that played with toys and other rats when young developed larger brains than those barred from joining the fun. Lack of play in childhood has been linked to adult pathology.

For humans, childhood play has been linked in adulthood to relationship satisfaction, emotional adjustment, and creativity. "Play shows us our common humanity. It is the genesis of innovation, and allows us to deal with an ever-changing world." Play is all consuming, restorative, and in the moment. For the adult, the play experience can provide freedom from time and in the words of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, be a "flow experience."

"Play shows us our common humanity. It is the genesis of innovation, and allows us to deal with an ever-changing world."

This book is not a text about needed materials for play at each developmental stage, nor a how-to-play-with-the child; rather, it is a lively discussion of the biological necessity for play in humans and animals. This a delightful, hopeful, engaging book that simulates ideas for everyday life and clinical work and is a must read.

Susan L. Dickinson,
Pediatric Psychology
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Announcements/Upcoming Events **Membership Renewal!**

February 3-4, 2011

The Children's Center 12th Annual "Bridging the Gap" Conference: Clinical Application of Attachment Theory and Research

Trauma and Dissociation in Young Children

Joyana Silberg, Ph.D.
Coordinator of Trauma Disorder Services for Children and Adolescents Sheppard Pratt Health System

Attachment-Based Interventions with Traumatized Children

Julie Ribaldo, MSW
Clinical Assistant Professor
University of Michigan School Social Work

February 3, 2011 (12:00 noon - 1:00 pm.)

UAIMH Luncheon Social (to be held on Thursday during the "Bridging the Gap" conference)

Welcome! (former, current, and prospective members)

Cannellas
205 E 500 S
Salt Lake City, UT
(South side of Salt Lake Library-across street)

UAIMH Open Board Meeting/Presentation

Date/Time TBA

April 17-21, 2012

WAIMH-World Association for Infant Mental Health

Capetown, South Africa

Please be Patient!

We are in the process of moving the UAIMH website to a new location.

You may continue to fill out the new membership form or renew your membership.

Mail payment by check to:

Janet Wade
c/o The Children's Center
350 S. 400 E.
Salt Lake City, UT 84111

<http://www.uaimh.org>