

# Play, the real work of childhood

As a parent I remember the stabbing feelings of inadequacy I experienced when I was asked “shouldn’t Aja be reading by now?” It’s perfectly normal, let’s face it, to feel pangs of jealousy when a friend boasts that her toddler can recite the Lord’s Prayer backwards! We are so often drawn into comparing *our* children’s progress to that of a mythical ‘Johnny Normal’. Fearful that their children might actually fall *behind* the pack, some parents even place them into *crammer* kindergartens offering computer skills, numeracy and literacy, before they even *get* to school.

David Elkind, in his book *The Hurried Child*, suggests, “We are a time-oriented and time-regulated society and we impart these values to our children. We hurry our children because we hurry ourselves.”

Paradoxically, whenever we plant flowers in our gardens, aren’t we content to watch them grow, sprout new leaves, bud and blossom? And aren’t we clear that this natural process takes time?

Yes, our children also go through specific and clearly definable developmental stages in their journey towards adulthood. In fact more and more is becoming known about the development of the human brain, but, as with most scientific knowledge, it often takes many, many years before that knowledge filters through to everyday life. And so it is that in many ways our traditional education systems still reflect the needs and aims of 19<sup>th</sup> century industrial society.

But is schooling our children earlier and earlier actually better for *them*? Educational policies tend to ignore the natural, kinesthetic mode of learning in young children – their natural impulse to be ever ‘on the move’, exploring and discovering for themselves – and impose the adult mode of seated, intellectually-oriented approaches, even Internet research! In this way we so often sacrifice our children’s right to childhood and natural development on the altar of that craven idol ‘*The Quicker, The Better*’

Brain researchers and child psychologists increasingly emphasize the importance of *play* in early childhood. Most kindergartens fail to recognize that it is in **play** – re-enacting social situations, exploring the natural world and experiencing physical laws *first hand* - that the pre-school child prepares herself physically, mentally and emotionally for the cognitive/conceptual learning required in Standard 1. Moreover, with **play** evolve basic life skills, such as how to resolve conflict, to *follow* should the situation demand it, how to take responsibility, have care and compassion with others, as well as the development of gross and fine motor skills. **It is important to know that if a child does not develop the basis of these life skills at the optimum time, in line with the stages of human development, it will not be able to learn them in the same way later.**

The pre-school (and early primary) child lives in a world of fantasy and imagination, *and it is in this world that we need to meet the child, not in ours*. Her brain is still forming itself and needs quite specific (natural, human) stimuli to make the necessary connections over time. Her sense of well-being and confidence rides on the experience of rhythm and routine she

finds in a supportive and loving home life and the predictable structure of the school day. Huge developmental strides are taken in the year leading up to 6 ½ as the child grapples with this ability to conceptualize. An ability that she can only *achieve* – it cannot be *taught!* It is at this time that the foundations of her capacity to visualize possibilities, and create them, are laid *for life*.

A child of this age is a gifted mimic, imitating adult behaviour and attitudes uncannily well – a responsibility it would do us well to take seriously. (Question: do we really want to leave this to the TV?) She may parrot what she hears from her teachers, and we often misinterpret this talent as ‘cleverness’, but it is devoid of any real meaning *for her*. For example, at this stage a child’s memory is also purely *associative* and not the more adult-like memory she develops later. As every parent knows when they ask their pre-school child “what did you do at school today?”, the answer is rarely forthcoming until something happens to remind her!

Children suffer from being brought down to earth too soon. Attempts to do so, with an academic curriculum and abstract concepts, are both premature and potentially damaging. The child tires quickly, is frustrated, distracted and unable to focus (and often diagnosed with learning difficulties or, worse, ADHD and given Ritalin), or is simply ‘burned out’. Joy, the true nature of the child, is thus extracted from the learning process, which should rather take advantage of her innate enthusiasm and curiosity about life.

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*“Our conventional psychometric approach to education of pouring knowledge into the child and ‘fitting him into the curriculum’ that is foreign to his nature must cease. We must replace it with a developmental approach which examines the needs of the child and how and why he develops as he does.*

E.Ogletree,  
*“School Readiness – The Developmental View”*

*“ Children under the age of 6 will have the best foundation for formal literacy and numeracy, learning in a more play-based early childhood programme’*

Kathy Silva,  
Oxford University Professor  
and Head of British Government-backed research on early years education.